The Journey of Willie Graham

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The Journey of Willie Graham

by TheDreadPirate

Summary

Tagline: A journey to find a loved one turns into a journey to find one's self.

The Great Depression affected millions of Americans and the Graham's were no different. The year is 1935 and a teenaged Willie is searching for his father who had to leave suddenly at the promise of stable work on. Armed with only his wits and bravery, Willie embarks on a journey from the backwoods of Louisiana to Washington state. Along the way he meets both friend and foe and is forced to decide whom is who. Hannibal saves him from being crushed under a train but the other tramps seem afraid of the older boy. Willie doesn't understand why, especially when Hannibal keeps popping up through Willie's journey to not only save him again but to make sure he's otherwise cared for.

On his way, Willie discovers that family isn't just who you're born to but who you accept and who accepts you in return. He learns that you can't always judge a book by its cover and that when love presents itself to you, you have to give it your all and cherish it for as long as you're able. Both Willie and Han each have a quest they are on, that nothing short of death will keep them from, but will they end together in tragedy or happiness?

Notes

Based on The Adventures of Natty Gann, one of my favorite films growing up because the girl looked like a boy and she was a little badass and John Cusack is hot and I don't care who knows it!

Thoughts in italics

Slang in bold.

Knowledge of Freight car living from documentary "Riding the Rails" 1997, found on YouTube.

Hobo terminology:

https://stevehely.com/2015/02/27/gay-hobo-slang/
http://www.angelfire.com/folk/famoustramp/terminology.html

Prologue

I walked one day

In the Garden of Wasted Things,

And there I found

The bitter ghosts of all that had been spent unwisely,

Or lost through brutal circumstance.

I found the childhood

That some labourer's child had never known;

I found the youth that some young man had squandered;

There I found some poet's genius

That had gone unrecognised.

I saw the ghosts of idle words,

And small talk,

That men had used to waste away the hours.

I saw the hopes that had been smothered,

And all the dreams

That never had come true,

And Laughter that had died for lack of bread.

I met with all the lives that had been misdirected,

And spoke with dreary shades

Of loves that might have been,

And songs that never had been sung.

I met with all these ghosts,

And many more;

And each of them

Sat silently in the shadows,

Brooding over quirks of mad Creation,

And puppets' dreams.

The Magpie - Robert S. Warshow - 1932

The Great War, what was to be the war to end all wars, ended with Germany signing an armistice on the 11th of November, 1918.

Millions upon millions perished before it was through, even more so were left wounded both physically and mentally. Of the over 200,000 American soldiers sent home with painful reminders of war was the father of this story's protagonist, William Graham Sr.

Bill Graham was selected for service in the spring of 1917 at the age of 19 and was honorably discharged several months before the war's end. He won no awards or medals in exchange for the blood and tears torn from his body.

He arrived back home in Venice, Louisiana not to the fanfare of a returning hero but to a firm handshake from his father and slight nod from his mother.

Bill lived with his parents on their farm but throughout his time overseas, he only thought of working on his fishing boat. The sea offered a small, though fulfilling sense of happiness, more so than working under a cold father and silent, miserable mother. Still, he endured life as a fisherman with war wounds that refused to stop aching no matter the weather.

Respite from the bone deep ache and the perennial chill from family was found with Ethel LeBleu, a girl Bill had gone to school with. They met after years apart and fell in love as though it was something building for ages, fate perhaps.

They married, she moved in with the Graham's making the space warmer just for her presence, and then William Graham Jr was born August 3rd of 1920 almost two full years after being in a war Bill thought he'd never return from.

Bill loved his boy more than he could ever express in words especially considering the kind of emotion his father was known for or lack thereof. He did everything in his power to make sure his wife and son were well taken care of and loved to the best of his abilities.

Providing for them was easy in the beginning, at least more so than expressing the love he surely felt for his family. He thought the world of his Ethel and Willie, but poor Bill wasn't ever shown the ways a man can love so he kept it inside even though it hurt him to.

Granddad Graham died when Willie was two years old. The family didn't mourn much seeing as how it was no real surprise with how the man lived in a bottle most of his life. Granny wasted away about a year later. Some folks said she followed after her husband but Bill knew it was more from wariness of a world she was never allowed to enjoy when that old bastard was still living; she just gave up without the old man there to scare her up every day.

There was no land to pass down as it went to paying off the elder Graham's debt to the bank and the remaining Graham's were forced to rent a shack from Bill's fellow fisherman, a black man called Budge.

Willie grew into a happy child, light of heart and easy to smile and laugh just like his mama. At times when his family was like that, Bill was happy his father was gone. The old bastard couldn't stand to see folks happy, especially not his own.

So, their deaths didn't effect Bill much. He'd experience much more pain when he had to hold boys like himself in the trenches in little towns outside Paris, watching the light leave their eyes.

What Bill couldn't properly handle was when his darling Ethel, the first person to make him feel loved, passed on after a hard fight with tuberculosis when Willie was eight.

Bill retreated inside himself for a long while after that. Poor Willie had to deal with his mother's death and fend for himself while his pa took to moonshine for comfort.

It was a difficult time but Willie understood his father's neglect in a way most children at such a tender age aren't able to. He knew the stories of how his parents fell for each other and how his father looked at his mother as though she saved his life.

Poor Bill would go on drunken rants from time to time. Telling Willie, it wasn't worth it; love. We all die in the end so what's the point?

Being told such things so young was painful for Willie but he understood. He saw the pain his pa was in and the booze certainly didn't help. Still, the idea of love became a touch frightening even as it intrigued him.

His mother loved to read him fairytales, you see. Love's true kiss and all that. She also spent all her personal savings to buy a fancy new radio and would turn it up as loud as it would go when love songs came on, playing the contraption for all it was worth.

Willie did his best to be helpful on their fishing boat but a child can only do so much. he caught enough for them to eat and to sell for essentials. He knew his father was a strong man; he survived the war and returned ; they both could survive this as well.

Several months after his wife passed, Bill was finally able to look outside of himself and see that he'd left his only child all alone. He sobered up, tortured himself with long hours of work to atone for his inattentiveness; Willie was just glad to see his father back to the land of the living.

Sadly, there was no amount of hard labor that could help them in the end. The price of fish steadily dropped and soon there was no money to pay off his own debts. The bank foreclosed on Bill's only worldly possession, his boat.

Even then, Willie tried to keep reading and playing music, to keep the memory of his mother alive at least. But all that happiness was all taken in the end as well, all was lost.

They ended up at Ethel's parents' with only a sack of clothes. Bill hopped all over the parish scaring up odd jobs, working for the railroad when they needed extra bodies to break and toil over hammer and steal.

Willie slept and ate at his maternal grandparents' home but he never felt welcome. He could see the disappointment they'd had from when their daughter married some poor farmer's son and it was now directed at him. He hated that they saw him as some sort of mooch just because they were able to keep their own business open though trying times.

His own respite was in reading where he could learn about places so different from rural Louisiana. Though the school in town had closed, just like so many around the nation, he tried his best to keep on reading just like his mama wanted.

But reading is a luxury in times like these so when his dad's next job would take him 100 miles away, further than they'd ever been apart, he knew he had to go too. Willie knew he had to work hard just like his pa now but he never stopped wanting, hoping to get back to his stories.

They travelled like this for years. From one place to another hoping for a fresh start, a better life. The older and bigger Willie got the more jobs he was qualified for but no matter the passage of time and back breaking work, he still kept intact his 'sensitive' nature,

You see, even though he had only his pa as an influence for the past six years, he was still so much like his mama. There was a time that Bill had loved this fact about his boy. He was happy to have a son so free with his happiness but that's not how others saw it. They saw a 'nancy boy'. They saw someone too different from the other men which meant he was picked on quite a bit. Bill spent a good portion of each day reminding Willie to 'watch himself', to not let others see that he was different.

The boy didn't fully understand so he took to withdrawing into himself more often than not. He'd ignore a person's eyes or even handshake, afraid that he wasn't behaving in a way they'd find agreeable. Bill hurt to see the remnants of Ethel ripped form his son but what

could he do? He had to protect his son and hiding his feelings was all he knew, all he could pass on.

By the time Willie hit 15 they had bounced around every parish in southern Louisiana. They'd spent that birthday in yet another rooming house, this one run by a woman who had taken a liking to his father but hated children, especially Willie.

Even without looking at her properly, Willie knew who Miss Lounds was. She was looking for a benefactor, someone easy to manipulate whether for money or for whatever personal desires she had. Bill couldn't see past her overly kind smile or devilishly lilting voice, but Willie certainly could and he made it his job to steer his dad from her best he could.

Yet again, things rarely turn out the way the Graham men hope for.

Willie came back to the rooming house from working part time at a local shop, collecting and drying driftwood. He got 10 cents for every 10 pounds of wood, capping at 100 pounds per day. It wasn't much but every bit helps, as his pa said.

He hadn't even made it to his room when Miss Lounds stopped him at the manager's desk. She handed him a letter in his father's messy cursive, a particularly evil smirk on her lips.

He turned to leave but stopped when she informed him in her usual saccharine sweet voice that dinner would be ready soon. Willie scowled and headed straight to his room wondering what she was playing at.

It was all revealed in the letter. Willie sat on the bed, shocked and alone. His dad had a good job opportunity working up in Washington state. Willie tried to ignore the feeling of loss and betrayal but it was difficult. He understood that his father couldn't wait for him to get home, he needed to act on this job opportunity as soon as possible. His understanding doesn't lessen the pain at all.

I'll get you to me soon Willie.

Willie forced himself to get through the days without his pa, waiting anxiously for a letter or phone call. He worked as long as he could as many places that would let him. He avoided Miss Lounds but she seemed to delight in turning up to remind him that he was alone and as per his father's note, she was responsible for him. Bill had given her some money with the promise of sending more for Willie's room and board.

Bill had been gone for three weeks when the landlady decided she wasn't paid enough. Willie had been working his tail off more as a distraction than as an adequate source of income but that didn't stop Miss Lounds from taking his bit of savings after searching his room.

Even still, it wasn't enough for her. She told Willie that since his bum of a father hadn't called in a week nor sent any money that she had grounds to kick him out. Willie tried to ignore her and find yet another job but he hadn't anticipated just how petty she could be.

He was just coming in from working at the butchers when he overheard her talking to someone on the phone at her desk. Normally Willie wouldn't have cared but she sounded far

too happy with herself for him to ignore. His instincts proved right when he overheard her giving someone his name, saying he'd been abandoned and she'd done all she could for the 'problematic' child.

Willie tamped down his anger and ran up to his room to gather his meager belongings. He took one change of clothing; underpants, trousers, undershirt and a thin coat;

In the end he wasn't terribly surprised by Lounds' betrayal. In fact, he saw this as the perfect push for him to go out and find his dad himself.

He managed to hold onto $8 that he hadn't left in his room for that woman to find. His dad would sometimes talk about hitchin' a ride on a train to get from one job to the next. He wasn't sure how far it'll take him but he figures he'll go as far north as possible and then after that he'd do whatever it takes to find a way west to Washington state.

He straightened himself up the best he could before getting in line at the train station's ticketing office. The clerk behind the window smiles kindly, too kind perhaps. Willie asks how far North his money will take him. The man tells him he'd make it all the way to Nebraska.

The clerk takes his money, but pockets it, and then gives Willie a ticket that he'll never even get to use because the man signals for a porter to get the authorities for a suspected runaway.

Willie was preparing to board when he's grabbed by a mustachioed man with a billy club. The man doesn't ask him any questions and the boy's attempts to explain himself fall on deaf ears.

He was dragged to a wagon when finally some instinct kicks in and Willie manages to pull his arm free and make a run for town. He runs faster than he's ever had to, knowing he must get used to it because this is his life now, running from supposed caregivers, running from the law.

He finally stops to breath when he gets to a structure that could be a warehouse. There's a lot of activity going on, yelling and clapping and glasses clinking. Prohibition ended a couple years ago and people are happy to be back into the swing of things without worry for the law.

He takes a peek inside out of curiosity and is shocked to see dozens of men gathered round a circular wooden structure. The lot of them are cheering as two mangy dogs fight each other to the death. It makes him sick to his stomach, even more so knowing he can't do a thing to save those poor animals.

He backs away walking around a small shack and then ducking behind a rusted tractor when a couple men walk out and head into the main building. Willie looks inside and finds the most beautiful dog he's ever laid eyes on. He could be mistaken for a wolf but Willie knows they are near twice the size of this dog.

His coat is a mix of whites, blacks, and greys. The animal sees him, looks at him warily, waiting to see what the new human will try to do to him. Willie sneaks inside the shack

without a thought and finds a rock to break open the cage. After that he urges the wolfdog to run.

The animal takes a moment to stare at him but then takes off into the forest leaving Willie to feel quite proud of himself for once, until the hard men inside come looking for their next fighter.

Willie gets drug outside and thrown into the dirt. Someone's meaty fist grabs his shirt front, hauling him up to dangle in their clutches as they demand to know what Willie did to their mutt. The man cocks his fist back about to let it fly when the boy refuses to answer but suddenly the dog comes flying from the dark, latching his teeth onto the brute's forearm.

Willie drops to his feet and is already taking off into the trees before the men can stop him. Willie runs until his chest hurts then he stops to look back for the wolf.

The animal doesn't disappoint, appearing out of the darkness once again, leaping deftly over felled branches until he stands before Willie, staring into the human's eyes.

Willie calms his frantic breathing so as not to ruffle the dog, says a few calming words, the typical 'good boy' while raising his left hand slowly, an offering. The dog accepts and moves on to smell up the boy's arm and into the sweat of his hair making Willie laugh. It's the first bit of joy he's had since his pa left.

"Do you wanna come along with me? We can watch out for each other." Willie asks more for himself than the dog of course. He pats the animal a few more times before they takeoff, away from their pasts and into adventure.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

> I changed Winston to be more German Shepherd like, the dog in the Natty Gann movie resembled a wolf.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chug, chug, chug.

Puff, puff, puff.

Ding-dong, ding-dong.

The little train rumbled over the tracks.

She was a happy little train for she had such a jolly load to carry.

Her cars were filled full of good things for boys and girls.

The Little Engine That Could (1930)

September 30th, 1935.

To most people, a boxcar is nothing more than a vessel; a means to transport freight across vast land. To some, however, it's a way to leave behind their unfortunate circumstances. They climb into a car and hope to be carried away to a better place, or at least somewhere that's hiring. And still to others, it's a call to adventure even at the cost of their own lives.

For Willie Graham it's his only option to find his pa after losing all his savings.

He's never done this before, hopping a train. He'd overheard tramps back home talk about the freedom of the rails though his dad was quick to dispel most of the fanciful stories. Back then it both scared and intrigued him. What was it like to be free and do as you please?

In the end, of course, his dad had the right idea.

Willie and his new four legged companion had made their way to the freight train yard just after midnight. That clerk stole his hard earned money and wouldn't let him ride like normal folk but he'd be damned if he didn't manage to get his money's worth somehow.

He heard the sounds of the train beginning to chug, smoke shooting up into the sky, and he knew they missed their chance. He watched the train slowly gaining speed and he cursed quietly under his breath at his bad luck.

Just as he was beginning to fear his mission was doomed before it even started he watched as several figures ran from the trees that were parallel to the tracks. They sprinted straight to the train, running alongside before hopping aboard one of the open boxcars. They made it look so easy but could Willie pull it off?

He looks at the dog as if he could offer a solution but his only response is a vigorous tail wagging.

"We best hurry then," Willie agrees.

The train is slowly picking up speed and the boy runs with all he's got. He tries to grab hold of the platform like he watched the others do but fear makes his fingers clumsy. He thinks he might go deaf soon as the train churns louder and louder and the blood rushes in his ears. He swallows the rising panic and latches onto a chain hanging from the open door. His feet drag as he tries to pull himself up.

His arms ache with every try but his will to live is still impressive in spite of his weakening body. He manages to get a hand back on the platform finally and he tries to hook a leg over as well. He can hear the dog barking at his side; Willie takes it as encouragement and finally locks his leg, hanging half on half off of the platform.

Just when he thinks his arms will give out, one of his fellow travelers decides to take pity, yanking him up by the back of his coat and throwing him into a stack of hay. Willie is panting heavily and wants to thank whoever helped him but while he catches his breath he now clearly hears the laughter and jeers directed at him. He wants to curl up into a ball until he remembers his friend.

He stands on still shaky legs and moves to cling to the door and calls, "Winston!"

He can see the wolfdog still running along, looking up at the open space his human just went through. His ears twitch as the boy urges him to join.

To Willie's surprise, the dog runs away from him causing the bums who'd gotten up to see what he was hollering at to laugh yet again.

Just when he's about to turn away, despairing at being alone yet again, he sees a flash of movement outside. He watches in delight as Winston runs straight at him, leaping and landing onto the platform, skidding to a stop in the same hay Willie just crawled out of.

"Good boy!" Willie cheers, laughing as he hugs the dog to him. He hears some disappointed murmurs from the others, a few applaud. One corner remains silent and that's where he

chooses for them to settle their weary bodies.

Boxcars aren't meant to transport humans. It's a redundant statement of course but it suddenly hits Willie all the same as he's huddled in said car with about a dozen other men.

He'd managed to effectively ignore the rabble in the car while worrying about Winston but now he hears the dead silence even louder than their chatter. He looks around to find the entire car staring at him, near a dozen men with wide, wary eyes watching them.

Willie feels a bit smug at the change in their tune assuming they were intimidated by Winston. It's much darker in the corner he's chosen for them. There are several crates piled there, secured to the walls effectively blocking any ray of moonlight from penetrating the darkness. Will settles just where the moon can reach and then tries to get Winston to lay at his side but the dog seems agitated.

"What's wrong buddy?" Willie whispers, trying to soothe the suddenly troubled dog.

Winston only whines and tries to tug Willie's sleeve away from the shadows. That's when he hears it. A soft chuff of what seems to be amusement coming from just beside him.

The breath catches in his throat and his hair stands on the back of his neck as realization dawns. He lets Winston pull him away at last and makes a silent promise to trust the dog's instincts next time.

"Smart move son," A bum from the opposite end of the car calls out to him after Winston has him situated to his liking, closer to the open door. "He might've helped ya that once but that's still a monster in them shadows. No offense meant of course." The bum adds, accompanied by a murmur of agreement apparently on both accounts that ripples amongst the bums.

"None taken," The mystery firgure responds amicably. His voice is pitched low, a bit gravelly. He can't put his finger on the accent, sounds almost French but not the dialect spoken round his hometown at least.

Whoever he is, he's done nothing thus far to warrant the fear that's suddenly gripped Willie but it's hard not to react thus when a group of grown men call out a monster, albeit respectfully in a way.

Willie tries to calm his breathing by focusing on Winston's. The dog lays at his side, panting loudly but relatively calm now. Willie's hands are buried in Winston's coat and he can feel the silky softness of the warm skin beneath. Winston looks up at him as if he's offering a comforting smile that Willie can't help but reciprocate.

He thinks of his pa then. Recalls how the stoic man would calm his fears whenever the night seemed extra dark or people were extra mean spirited. The love his pa showed was different from the close affection from his mama but Willie cherished it all the same.

When stress got the better of him his dad would remain as calm as he always was and tell him to focus on something outside himself. *"See them trees out there boy? Watch how that one's all caught in the wind like. Ain't nature somethin' else?"*

It worked more often than not but since his pa left it was getting more and more difficult to deal with. Willie leans in to give Winston another hug and whisper his thanks.

He can breathe easier now but there's a touch of embarrassment and anxiety still lingering in his chest. He can't help himself and looks back into the corner but still can't see a thing. Willie was raised with good manners so he takes a steadying breath before addressing the dark corner.

"Thanks mister," He says to the blackness before ducking his head back to Winston for distraction.

"Don't mention it, *son*," The man's voice is even lower this time. The accent sounds more foreign to Willie's ears as well, making him curious enough to lean back towards the shadows in an attempt to glimpse the person within.

The man says nothing further so Willie abandons his attempt and leans back against the cold, wood and metal of the boxcar wall. He catches a yawn in his hand before curling his body around the soft warmth of Winston.

It's louder than he thought it'd be. Though, maybe he never did think on it beforehand just how damned loud a freight train could be when you're sat on the grimy floor of a boxcar.

His body shivers gently, jostling the various aches he's accumulated over the first leg of his journey. He was so tired that as soon as he was relaxed enough to pass out, he did so, not sparing a moment to think over if he should let himself be so vulnerable in a group of strangers.

A few hours later Willie wakes to the sound of a scuffle. He opens his blurry eyes just in time to see the hazy figure of one man throw another man off the train.

Willie gasps and clutches Winston waking the dog. Animal and boy watch the man stalk back to where he apparently came from, the shadows just behind Willie. In spite of the violent act all Willie can think is *Damnit! Didn't even get a good look at him!* The man seems tall and thin but with sleep still caught in his eyes Willie can't be sure of distinguishing features.

The boy looks to the other end of the car to find several men watching as well, making sure the figure goes back to his designated area before they even begin to settle down. That same man who spoke to him earlier crawls closer to Willie with an awed look on his craggily face.

"One man's monster is another's guardian angel, I 'spose." The man comes in mighty close.

"Huh?" Willie asks confused leaning away from the man's foul breath.

"One o' the other tramps had a mind to make you his **bindle-boy**." The man snickers.

"His what?" Willie asks louder than he intended, inadvertently moving away from the creepy guy, backing into the shadows that now feel safer.

"Actually, he was going after your personal effects," the heavily accented voice gently corrects from behind him. Again, he finds it similar to Louisiana Creole but so different.

Willie whips around in hopes of catching a look.

Willie gets an ache in his chest, terror and dread. He could've lost the little food he had and the few items he'd managed to save.

"Thank you," he chokes out, sincerely grateful to the shadows.

"You're welcome," the dark responds. "If you should decide to sit on *my* side of the door, I believe there'd be no need to worry about further attacks."

The man's voice is unlike anything Willie has ever heard. He must not be from around here even though there's a hint of a southern drawl, there also is definitely something other about him. It's soft yet holds a sense of power and authority, danger, that makes the other spectators move as far away as possible. But not Willie. Even in the way he's taken possession of half of the boxcar, *my* he says, and Willie feels inclined to believe the claim.

"Thanks again sir," is all he says before crawling past the door and settling this time within the shadow of a large crate and then trying to tempt Winston to come over.

The shadow makes that same hum of amusement from their first quasi encounter but this time it makes Willie feel more at ease. He falls asleep even easier this time, feeling an inexplicable sense of safety.

Chapter End Notes

Glossary:

Bindle-boy: The adolescent lover/cook to a bunker. Bindle is a bedroll.

Bunker: A tramp who takes a boy (young man) 'under his wing'.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Bulls: railroad security.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Willie rouses a few hours later. There's still a while before the sun will rise.

At some point during the most restful sleep he's had in weeks, his mysterious savior slipped from the boxcar. For a moment, Willie felt bereft. As he drifted off to sleep he imagined he might have found himself a friend, an ally.

All in all, he knows he shouldn't be so upset about being left alone. He's gotten used to it to some degree since his pa left. After all, why would an obviously experienced loner want some snot nose kid tagging along, nipping at his heels?

Willie stretches a bit before he realized what had woken him in the first place. The other patrons of the boxcar are getting ready. The train makes a series of loud noises before it begins slowing down. A few of the spryer fellows leap off first; some landing on their feet and taking off towards the trees, some tucking into a roll before hopping up and running off themselves.

"Best get a move on my boy!" The old timer from last night shouts to him over the noise. "The closer you get to the station, the closer you get to the **bulls**."

Before Willie has a chance to ask what that means, jumps off himself. When the train slows a bit more, finally Willie felt safe enough to jump as well.

He takes a tumble getting off, Winston lands easily on his paws, and then they follows the others' lead and makes a run for the trees.

He walks for several minutes before stopping to take a breather and get his bearings. He has no idea where he is, only that he's north of New Orleans. He's lost sight of any of the other travelers after that.

Worry sets in now that he's alone. He crouches beside a tree as he tries to breathe, as he tries not to let himself worry about his next move.

Winston trots up to him, tongue hanging from his wolfish smile, ever happy just to run. But he knows his boy isn't feeling as well as he so he whines in sympathy and butts his head against Willie's arm, trying to arrest his attention.

At least that's how Willie sees it and he is ever thankful for the distraction. His anxiety drops as his fingers dig gently into the wolfdog's coat.

Soon he's clear headed enough to think about their next move but the only thing that comes to mind is to head on into town and try to find the next train running north. It's a start at least.

They walk along the tracks for about 20 minutes before the station comes into view. According to the sign, he's made it to Baton Rouge. It isn't very far from where he started but a bit of pride forms in him at the slight accomplishment.

He isn't terribly familiar with the town but his dad did have work here for a few months last year. He avoids the platform and ticketing booth altogether and heads into town.

It's worth knowing that Willie's mama made certain to instill a sense of pride in her son. Unlike the boy's father who wanted him to feel proud of a good day's work, Ethel Graham subscribed to the idea that 'cleanliness is next to godliness'. Her child was always scrubbed and brushed cleaner than a whistle and she was happy to find that Willie didn't put up a fuss like other boys his age might when confronted with soap and a comb.

So, when he walked down the busy morning Baton Rouge streets he knew why folks were staring at him with open disgust in their eyes. He must be a sight. Dirt and bits of grass and hay all over him. Hair lightly matted from sweating in his sleep.

He tried to ignore the fact that he'd apparently started smelling so terrible that a mother walked her child to the opposite side of the street to avoid him.

He rested a hand atop Winston's head to keep him steady at his side but the dog whined in response to his boy's increasing stress. Willie glanced down to see that the dog could use a good bath as well.

He tries his best to brush it off and keep moving. He's desperate to dig into the food he'd manage to stow in his bag but he needs to figure out where the next freight train is headed and when.

Walking through town he gets a few more dirty looks and is very disappointed in himself for not being able to shake it off better; the shame. Each person turning their nose up at him hurts a little deeper.

He supposes he shouldn't blame them. He might have avoided someone like him too if the roles were reversed. He's more upset that he hadn't even imagined how it would feel to be seen only as a vagrant and nothing more. Was he no longer seen as human?

Before he'd ever even got it in his head to go across the country by rail, Willie had a rather glamorous idea of the lifestyle. He'd heard others his age describe it as something magical, a call to adventure like from the books Willie loved so much though he struggled to read them.

Folks have been bumming rides on locomotives since the first tracks were pounded into the earth but in the last several years there has been an uptick in the activity, especially amongst the nation's disenfranchised youth.

So many people lost their jobs, their very livelihood since the crash. Willie and his pa were lucky to have survived together as long as they did but in truth luck had little to do with it. It was just the two of them after all. Willie's seen bigger families than his get thrown onto the street, evicted from their homes. The kids could no longer even find refuge during the day as schools were getting shut down left and right.

But it wasn't until he'd gotten on the road himself that he could truly appreciate how hard things were. So far he's seen a family of five; mother, father, two girls and a little boy bumming rides out west in the hopes that California has a second gold rush.

Willie's only been on the street for a few days but he can see glimpses of his future in the faces of his fellow travelers. Hunger so deep it makes beasts of desperate men.

The night wasn't doing any favors either. He'd spent his first night after leaving Lounds behind a boarded-up convenience store with Winston. Still, that didn't make him feel any safer as the dark closed in.

He reaches the train station and finds the bulletin board with the departure times written in chalk. It's here that he realizes this information is useless. The board only records the times for passenger trains. Willie sighs, shoulders drooping before he decides to just walk along the tracks heading north until a situation arises allowing him to hop a new train.

Willie and Winston leave the station and start walking parallel to the tracks in the direction he's pretty sure is north. Winston starts whining again and this time the boy knows it's the same hunger pangs he's dealing with. He fishes out a can of baked beans from his bag and a can opener. He stops walking and motions for Winston to do the same.

He's never had a dog before and doesn't know what he's supposed to feed them but they both have to eat so he tries to decide the best way to go about it. He can't really pour the soupy beans into the animal's mouth and he doesn't want to pour some onto the ground either. So, he pours some into his hand and waits patiently for Winston to lap it up. He gives the dog one more handful before wiping his hand onto the dewy grass and then his trousers. He manages to chew one mouthful himself when he's suddenly grabbed by the arm and thrown to the dirt.

"What we got here?" The man's breath was rancid as it blew across Willie's face. He helped the boy to his feet by way of a fist in his hair.

"Looks like a **candy kid** to me," another man Willie can't see chuckles.

The smelly man laughs in kind while spinning Willie around to face them. They both wear peaked hats atop their sweaty heads; unbuttoned dress shirts opened to reveal sweaty undershirts. Willie's eyes are drawn from their uniforms down to the billy clubs in their hands.

"Yeah, what's wrong sweetheart, you lost your bunker? Or maybe you ain't found you one yet."

Willie's stomach clenches at the way the disgusting men look at him. Once again, he finds himself ignorant to the language of the road but at least he knows he has to get away from

these two as fast as he can.

“Turn me loose!” Willie yells, trying to yank himself free.

“Look at this lil piece o’ hard candy, Herbert. He’s gon’ be real popular in that jail cell.”

Willie’s mouth drops open at that. “Jail? But I ain’t done nothin’-”

“Nothing but be a tramp trying to hitch a ride you ain’t paid for, is all.” The man still holding his hair gave him a shake as punishment.

“I, I weren’t hitchin’ nothin’! I’m just walkin’ is all!” Willie can’t help but sound desperate.

“Well, that may be,” says the accomplice, scratching his chin. “Jed, what say we just leave him be and walk away... for a fee of course.”

“Alls I got is a few cans on me. Please sir just lemme go. I ain’t no trouble maker, I swear. I’m just tryin’ to get to my pa.”

The man holding him sighs in irritation. “Save the sob story kid. You’ll go to jail and if you’re lucky you’ll stay there, if not, the refuge will come and take ya.”

The other man laughs and moves to take a hold of Willie’s arm when out of the blue a fist lands square on his big dumb jaw. He drops like a ton of bricks.

Jed still has a solid grip on the boy as he spins around in time to see the same gloved fist flying at him before he joins his friend in the dirt.

“Come on kid, get the lead out!” The newcomer yells, grabbing Willie by the arm and taking off with him into the nearby trees.

Willie shakes off the shock, yanks his arm free and starts running alongside the man. Even though he is wearing a bandana over his face with a slightly tattered black fedora atop his head, Willie can clearly see the man is black. He understands all the more now why they must get away as fast and far as they can.

Willie forces himself to run that much further, a small price to pay for this man saving him.

They run for a good 10 minutes more until the man stops to take a breather against a tree. He pants loudly before yanking down the bandana and letting out a loud whoop of excitement.

He’s a good half foot taller than Willie is. His skin is the color of chestnut and there’s a gap between his teeth when he smiles. The man could be called intimidating but after such a grand first impression, Willie will only ever see him as kind.

The man’s enthusiasm is catchy and it greatly helps to calm Willie’s nerves. The boy smiles back and tries to thank the man between breathes.

“No need kid.” The man brushes off gently. “Those bastards had it coming. Roughin’ up poor folk don't fly with me.”

Willie nods, lit up with gratitude. His face falls when he remembers what those creeps said to him. “They called me a candy kid. What’s that?”

The man’s face turns stormy. “You don’t need to know what that means, just avoid anyone trying to get you to be one.”

Willie nods but he’s even more curious now. He’ll wait until a little later when the other fellow isn’t looking so he can jot the term down, figure it out later.

After delivering his warning, the man claps a hand on Willie’s shoulder. “So, where you headed, kid?”

“Washington. Gonna find my pa.” His words are a little shaky, the recent ordeal will rattle him for a while, but his determination to go on overshadows his natural fear response.

“Washington? State?” The man asks, to which Willie nods. “You know how to get there?”

Willie bit into his lip, embarrassed as he shook his head no.

The man watches Willie put himself right, smoothing down the shirt those men pulled askew and buttoning up his knapsack that had been left open in their haste to get away. The boy sighs in disappointment after finding that his coat and another can of food were lost.

There are quite a few questions swimming in the man’s eyes but he keeps a lid on them for now as he makes a decision.

”Well I’m not headed to the northwest myself but I am off to Little Rock next. Looks like those men lost you a meal as well as your calm and quiet Sunday. What say we travel a ways together? I can set you on the right track west.”

A weight lifts off of Willie’s shoulders as he looks back up to the man, grateful once again. “Yessir.”

Chapter End Notes

Bulls: railroad security.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Period Language:

I couldn't bear to use the term 'Negro' even though it was the kindest term back then. I'm going with Black even though it became more prominent during the Civil Rights Movement of the 60s when Black people began celebrating our heritage and beauty more than ever before.

I wanted to add this note to let readers know i'm not trying to downplay or candy coat our history, but i figured since i'm just writing a fanfiction about two white gay boys, well it felt disrespectful in a way even though I'm Black too... idk i'm hella sensitive folks.

Also, I really wanted to include some of the Black experience at the time because it's a big deal and I couldn't imagine having Jack in the story without addressing some of it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Willie has found a new friend. Sure he knows they won't be able to travel for very long but he's beyond happy not to be alone at least for a little while.

The man's name is Jack Crawford, and though he isn't much older than Willie at 23, he's no stranger to taking on tasks even folks older than him aren't ready for. He's got seven younger siblings, you see, so it's instinctual for him to take a leadership role and help younger folk when he can.

Jack is also a 'talker'. He's got opinions about everything and he enjoys expressing them. And Willie doesn't mind at all. It means he doesn't have to offer much in way of conversation and best of all he learns something new every time Jack jumps to a new topic.

"You wanna pick your car while it's rolling. If it takes you too long to jump aboard you risk getting spotted by the bulls, so be sure you can handle it or just wait for the next train." Jack says matter of fact over the rumble of the boxcar they're sat in.

"The bulls patrol with lanterns and rifles but they can't be everywhere so you're best bet is to go at night.

"There can be over 20 bodies in a boxcar at a given time so even though you'll travel solo most often, you gotta get used to close quarters, sharing space with strangers. They'll be from all different walks of life, all colors, following the harvest or looking for cheap thrills."

Willie's never heard a single person speak so much in his life. He's certain he's never even thought as much as Jack can talk about. This isn't a matter of annoyance for the younger man mind you, it's only that Jack has learned so much about life and Willie wants badly to catch up.

"Never dangle your legs over the side of the open freight door. It seems like a fun time until you see a man yanked off by a branch or a wooden post, drug to hell and smashed like a hotcake.

"I wouldn't personally suggest riding in one of them open-top hopper cars. Heard a story of a man fell asleep in one and was smothered to death under a ton of gravel. Guess they don't check 'em 'fore they fill 'em.

"You should also know to avoid the smoke, don't breathe that stuff in if you can avoid it. A few years back I was walkin' with a pal of mine atop a train once but we was too close to the stack. It came right at him, the smoke, and he couldn't avoid it. He's ok now but he was coughing up bits of black for nearly a year.

"In my younger days I was taking all sorts of chances. Walking between cars while the train was haulin' ass, jumping before it slowed down enough. I must have had an angel watching over me. My favorite was walking on top of the standard boxcars. Gives a man the feeling he's flying and by god if that isn't what I've wanted most in my life. Take flight and soar o'er head away from any problems or cares... fly straight to my Bella and take her along too."

Jack's tone is very different than Willie is used to as well. Not foreign how that mysterious shadow man sounded, but proper in a way Willie wasn't used to. He rarely cuts off his words to make them shorter as Willie does and he knows so many terms it nearly makes the kid's head spin. Willie finds himself not only writing down several words Jack uses over the course of their time together but also learning from the man's cadence, the way he speaks so clear and confident.

"It goes without saying that it's best to avoid getting locked up but especially for someone as young and... inexperienced as you. There are people in every facet of the system just waiting to take advantage. The cops, the jailers, the courts, even the folks that run the orphanages. You gotta look out for number one Willie and I'm sorry to tell you that most adults won't help you.

"I've had me a few run ins with the law but I managed to high tail it before I was caught. Nowadays I just stick to working and steer clear of any trouble with authorities. Worst I do is hitch a free ride or two.

He talked the whole trip up to Little Rock without much help from Willie which was just fine by him especially after Jack gave him a little box of Boston Baked Beans which turned out not to be beans at all but peanuts coated in candy. Willie tried to savor them slowly but the delicious treat was gone long before they arrived.

Jack didn't say anything about how Willie kept looking into the box as if hoping to find a wayward bean; he knew well how hungry a person can get living like they do. So he offered advice on how to keep fed on the road.

“Now, if you’re real hungry and desperate you can go begging. I myself wasn’t so lucky with this unless I happened upon Black folks with food to spare, but for a cute white boy though, I'm sure you’d do just fine.

“Try to clean your face a bit, use proper language and such. If you’re in front of a restaurant you might get an ounce of pity from a waitress or a customer, might even get a day’s work in exchange for a meal.

“I know a few youngsters who were bold and hungry enough to go straight up to folks’ property. Got a bath, a **sit down**, and a nap in doors out of it. Now, I don’t want you to think it’s all that easy. Sometimes you gotta trust folks but even then, never let your guard down. I've seen people with what I thought was a genuine smile on their faces but come to find out they were as treacherous as the devil himself!

“The trains are dangerous, the law is dangerous, but if you ask me what you really need to watch out for is the other bums. There are some people out here like you and I; with purpose and good intentions. There are people too who are down on their luck and just need to drift for a spell, maybe find them some purpose and such. Then, you got the bunch what makes fools of us all. The violent, ill-willed folk who are out here to force the same hurt they feel onto others. I've seen evil out here Willie. Be brave but be vigilant, my friend.

“And the **jungles**!” Jack exclaims as they get off their train and start walking into town. “There are bum camps hidden in the woods scattered all over the country. Might seem like a good idea, might seem safe to be around like characters, but again kiddo, don’t trust none of them folks for a second! Believe you me, you got lucky as the day is long meeting me.”

“Don’t I know it?” Willie said, counting his blessings. “I’m also lucky I found Winston in time before his fight and on my first train, a man helped me aboard and then he threw another feller off for trying to pick my pocket.”

Jack frowns in thought. “You are mighty lucky then kiddo. All the more reason to keep your eyes peeled. That feller you’re talkin’ about, he didn’t try nothing with you? Just helped out of the kindness of his heart?”

Willie looked thoughtful at that. “He was nice enough to me but the others did act plenty scared of him.”

“That’s another good tip, Willie. If you see a group of bums agreeing to avoid someone, trust them.” Jack goes quiet for a time, thoughts buzzing around in his head. “What he look like?”

“Hmm?” Willie’s got himself distracted as they entered the quiet town. He was worried about encountering more people with disdain in their eyes and preconceived notions of his character.

“The man that helped you. Would you remember his face if you saw it again?”

“I didn’t see him at all.” Willie says, still disappointed himself that he wasn’t able to get a look at the man who helped him. “He was in the shadows but I did hear his voice. First I thought him Creole but next he spoke it was differ’nt, couldn’t tell what parts he’s from.”

Jack stops walking and Willie follows suit. “Did he sound German?”

“German? What’s that like?” Willie waits for Jack to say something further but the older boy just stares off into space.

“He was real kind to me Jack. Sure, he was a bit scary but he helped me when he didin’t havta.” Willie doesn’t know why he feels so defensive of a man he hadn’t even met but the need to clear the strangers image wells up in him all the same.

“That’s fine Willie, that’s real fine.” Jack scratches at his chin in thought and decides to drop the conversation for now. “Maybe he really was just a good Samaritan but remember that things are tough all over these days. People are willing to harm one another for busted shoes, a tin of food, or a bit of work. Not to mention what they do to folks who look like me.”

That last statement sends a shiver down Willie’s spine. He knows too well what Jack means and it makes his chest ache as he tries to suppress the still fresh memory of what people in the south are capable of when hatred is in their hearts; what people did to the Budge’s son when they were growing up.

Jack sees the impact his words have had on Willie and changes the subject after that.

They walk in silence to a building just across from a lumber yard. There’s a banner strung up over the door reading **“WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION Sign up today”.**

“I was thinking, Willie. You could use some more experience being out in the world, use some money too lord knows. How about I see if I can get you on with this program? It’s no guarantee but there’s no harm in trying.”

Willie’s eyes grow big as saucers. “If I had a little money I could get to pa faster.”

“Well I’ve gotta talk with the foreman first kiddo, see if he’s in need of an extra hand. It’s gonna be hard labor you know.”

Willie nods his understanding. “I can work anythin’ Jack! Really I can.”

“Yeah, we’ll see,” Jack says with a fond smile and a shake of his head at his excited friend. “Some folks aren’t made for brick layin’ or track setting but we’ll see what you’re made of soon enough, my friend.

“If this doesn’t pan out I know some folks that joined up with a travelling carnival. Did you know there was black cowboys, they don’t show that in movie houses let me tell you…” Jack starts on yet another story as they get in line.

The WPA is a government run program that gives jobs to those who are unemployed, able bodied and over 18. It turns out Jack is previously acquainted with the person in charge of signing up new workers so they have an easy in.

This man is a few shades darker than Jack with an easy smile to match. They shake hands and laugh about old times briefly before getting down to business.

“Are there any spots left? I’ve got a fella here in need of some work.” The man, Mr. Rogers, looks just behind Jack then. He doesn’t hide his surprise when he sees Willie and questions Jack’s new choice of travelling companion.

“You know me Rog*, he needed help.”

*(Rog pronounced Rodg)

The other man hums in agreement. “I know you bend ya back for folks in need, just forgot you helps all kinds, with yo Yankee self.”

Jack and Mr. Rogers laugh at a shared joke before the man sobers up and starts writing in his ledger. “I got plenty of room left fo’ this job, son. But you best keep an eye on him, man name Carmichael is foreman of this job and he’s the typical good ol’ boy, might not take kindly to a friendship like y’alls.”

Jack nods in understanding before motioning for Willie to step forward. Mr. Rogers smiles at the boy and indicated where he should sign. He sees that his information has already been filled, including an address in Chicago and his age being 18. Willie keeps his lip buttoned about the error, trusting Jack to explain later as he slowly scratching out his cursive the way his ma taught him so long ago.

The two acquaintances finish up the paper work and Jack is told where the bunk is located and what time supper will be. Willie’s mouth waters at the prospect of a hot meal.

“Let’s see if they’ve got water for a shower, huh kiddo?” Jack says as he leads Willie around the corner. The boy nods excitedly, hoping for the same.

After finding their bunk room and indeed being allowed a quick scrub, along with Winston, they’re just in time for supper. Just like the shower system, the food is outside. Willie is no stranger to such a rustic setting so he feels right at home but he does notice the looks he gets.

“What they starin’ at Jack?” Willie whispers after they get their bowl of stew and hunk of bread which he tears up and tosses to his dog.

Jack looks up then from his meal and casually glances around, nodding at some folk and narrowing his eyes at others. “They’re just curious, kiddo that’s all. It’s not often a white boy sits with us. Just keep to yourself.”

That’s when Willie realizes that indeed, he is the only person that looks like him. The bunk house, the bathroom, and now this row of benches for meals. He takes another peek around and sees that there is no animosity in the men’s gazes, just interest.

After chow time is over they head back to the bunks and Jack secures them a pair of cots side by side. Jack is chatting again when Willie finds an opening for his own questions.

“Jack, why was they curious… ‘bout me?” Willie asks in a whisper.

Jack smiles and looks around at the room that's slowly filling up before leaning closer to Willie.

"Cuz now, you're the odd man out, aren't you?" He chuckles. "They're likely wondering why you aren't over in the main camp, the white camp."

"There's another camp?" Willie asks, surprised.

"Yeah kiddo. You thought a bunch of black folks was runnin' the show, hiring ourselves? Not down here Will, that's for sure. The other camp is closer to the job site. There's more than twice the manpower than this camp here."

"Oh," is all Willie can say in response.

"You know, I'd call you naïve but you're just a pretty good kid ain't ya? I mean, you are naïve but…" Jacks chuckles.

Willie frowns and Jack laughs harder. "Don't get all somber now. Look here, I had to point out the fact to you that you stuck out like a sore thumb. My guess is you come from a place where being in a sea of Black men is not only common but nothing to be worried about. So it makes me less inclined to call you naïve and even more eager to call you friend."

Willie ducks his head, shy of the emotions Jack is sharing but happy none the less.

"Enough of that. Let me introduce you around." Jack claps his hands together, getting the attention of a few other men getting settled.

"This here is Percy, he's a few years older than you. We've worked a couple farms together in the past." The boy in question nods in his direction by way of hello.

"And this old timer over here goes by Old George. We've raised a few buildings haven't we?" This man is older than everyone here and he smiles warmly as he shakes Willie's hand.

Jack chuckles. "We are acquainted by the hue of our skin and the struggles that are forced upon us because of how people judge our color. In that way, we are all brothers. Sometimes when you're out in this world, with so many white faces spewing hatred at ya, just seeing another Black man can help set you at ease a bit."

Willie nods. He can see how comforting that would be, to have someone who was like you is some way. Though he's never felt that himself, not with other white folk. He's only ever felt like he belonged with his mama and pa.

Willie spends the week erecting a brand new library in the center of town. His own parish didn't have its own library so he never had the chance to visit one.

Jack got permission from Mr. Rogers that they could leave Winston in the bunk as long as he doesn't act up.

When they get out to a clearing in the still warm southern autumn air, Willie is excited about being part of constructing a building not to mention a future library. He sticks close to Jack and follows his lead.

First, several men lay down chalk outlines of where the structure will be built. After that the foundation team comes in to start digging and laying cement. While that's going on, Willie and Jack get assigned to a group to start building the north facing wall which starts out lying flat on the ground.

It takes a full work day for the walls to be completed, as far as their skeletal structure goes, and they'll be installed once the foundation is fully set the next day. Willie's shoulders and arms ache more than ever before but it's the good sort of hurt that comes after a fulfilling days' work.

Willie does a decent job of adapting to the labor. He takes direction easily and executes orders swiftly. Here and there throughout the day the work gets a little easier which allows for some conversation which means it's Jack's story time yet again.

Jack is originally from Ohio. The first time he train hopped was when he was 15 too. It was right when folks started losing their jobs and farms were being taken by the banks. He left his mother, father, and seven younger brothers and sisters to lessen the hardship of feeding another mouth.

It was at times the best freedom he'd ever known and the most terrified he'd ever been. He found some good times on the road but he always made sure to find work and send money home as well.

Willie admired him for that. Jack had done all this at the same age but he'd done it selflessly, sacrificed the little money he earned to help people who couldn't help him in return. Willie felt a little guilty, thinking that his journey was a selfish one, fueled mostly by loneliness.

That wasn't the end of Jack's impressiveness. He managed to keep attending school in between his travelling and working. He earned grades good enough to be accept into Howard University in Washington DC, an HBCU, Historically Black College or University. He started right away working on his law degree when he met the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen.

"I asked the dean for a semester off to make some money. I know we're still young and we have a ways to go before we've got all our learning done but the timing feels right."

"Right for what?" Willie asked innocently.

"Right for marriage. You can't just let the one you love walk around without knowing it. You especially don't let someone as beautiful as my Bella walk around without something comparably lovely gracing her ring finger.

"There's no use lying to that woman so I just said I needed a little time away to get my affairs in order. She smiled at me the way she does when she knows I'm up to something but all she did was give me a kiss and her blessing and told me not to make her wait too long. I'm

thinking I've got another four jobs to work before I can buy this beautiful ring I saw in a shop back in DC. I can't wait to get back home to her," He sighs.

Home. Willie hasn't had a home for some time now. Not since his mama passed on. He can't help but wonder when things can return to how they used to be, or if they ever can.

"What 'bout you, son. Got no stories to tell?" Old George walks over after hearing Jack drone on to ask Willie with that deep voice of his. The boy shakes his head, bashful like, wary of talking about the past as it was still sore for him.

George then changed the subject but didn't let up on Willie much.

"What about them hunched shoulders then and that tiny little church mouse voice?"

Willie looks up from the handkerchief off berries he'd collected with the others during lunch break. He knows he's on the quieter side, never spoke up much at school nor anywhere else, but he's never noticed his poor posture before. "What's wrong with 'em?"

"It's not that it's wrong," Jack interjects, a little protective of his young charge. "It's just that you gotta try to look less timid.

"You must survive out here young man!" Old George's voice booms even when he's speaking in hushed tones. "Can't do that lookin' down all the time. Gotta show this world who's boss!**"**

Jack nods at that. "He ain't wrong. I know you get nervous sometimes Willie, but life ain't gonna do you no favors more than it already has. You've gotta keep your head up, shoulders square, and eyes confident. Don't let no one push you down."

Willie was a little embarrassed by the impromptu pep talk but he took their words to heart. He still feels like a little kid but he has to break out of that. He's a man now no matter what anyone else says, and he's the only person who can take care of him; he needs to act accordingly.

All is well as far as the young man can see, good work, hot meals, a reasonably comfortable cot to sleep in, and a lukewarm shower that none of them can shake their nose at. But on the third day of working, when they've just finished constructing the roof and mounting it on the walls they erected the day before, a bit of trouble gets stirred up.

Thus far, the two groups of Black and Caucasian men have done fine working separately and at times together. Their group starts to put up sheets of plywood, tacking them to the northern wall. Percy is working at the west corner when suddenly one of the men working on the western wall hollers.

"You take my hammer boy?!" A red faced man with a beer barrel gut charged up to Percy, grabbing him by his shirt front.

"No sir!" The young man squeaks.

“I put it down for a minute and the only one ‘round was you. You sayin’ I’m lyin?”

Percy shakes his head, terrified.

Willie started shaking in his shoes the moment the man started yelling. He took a step forward, wanting to help Percy but Old George puts his hand on Willie’s shoulder, shakes his head and then watches as Jack steps up to calm the situation.

“Hey there Luther, let’s talk about this.” Jack approaches the man as if he were a beast, hands raised, cautious steps, a calm smile forced on his nervous face. “Just let Percy go and we can get to the bottom of it.”

The man roars again, using disgusting slurs and profanity to make his point and Willie feels his stomach drop like it’s about to fall out of his body. He thinks of Tobias and how the mob came for him. They said he’d tried flirting with a white woman and her husband didn’t take kindly to that at all.

Willie’s shivering gets worse and bile rises in his throat. He shakes his head hard enough to rattle his brain as he tries to rid himself of the memories of his childhood friend’s lynching.

The rattle to his head works some and a few deep breathes later he’s moving to the corner of the wall where Percy was working. He sees the hammer Percy dropped after the man grabbed him and then he walks a few steps more to where Luther was working. He looks through a tool box there but finds no hammer. He looks around the edge of the building and kicks his feet through tall areas of grass. The yelling continues intermittently as Jack tries in vain to calm the beastly man down.

Willie looks at the wooden toolbox again, this time picking it up intending to pour it out but there it is. The hammer was underneath it.

“I- I found it! Mister, it was here the whole time!” Willie calls out. The man finally lets Percy go and stalks over to Willie, the look of murder in his eyes doesn’t lessen.

Willie takes several steps back, fear forcing him to grab the hem of his shirt just to have something to hold onto.

The man looks at his tool box and then down at the hammer that sits in the indentation of his tool box. He looks over to where Percy had dropped his own tool and lets out a chuff of laughter.

“You got lucky, boy.” He calls to Percy. He looks at Willie with the same anger as before. “Nosy little shit.”

Willie swallows hard and then takes off back to where he belongs, not feeling welcome at all even when he looked around to find most of the other white men glaring at him. When he rounds the corner he sees Old George rubbing Percy’s shoulders and whispering calming words and encouragements. Jack comes his way and gives him a squeeze on his shoulders too.

“You looked scared shitless, kiddo. Never thought you’d snap out of it like that. Well done.”

Willie nods, his face still pale. He shrugs off Jack’s approval, embarrassed; he hadn’t done much.

Willie walks over to Percy who is still trying to calm his nerves in order to get back to work. “Hey Percy, I can help with this corner if you like.”

The other boy sighs as he picks his hammer back up. He looks up at Willie with a smile, nods and says, “Thanks Kiddo.”

Willie’s face scrunches at the nickname he’s barely used to Jack using.

Jack overhears and butts in, chuckling. “His name’s Willie. I just got in the habit of joshing him for his age.”

Percy starts laughing as well.

“Don’t know why you laughin’, wit’ yo’ young self.” Says Old George joining in to laugh.

Work gets back on track after the ‘misunderstanding’. Willie stays nervous the rest of the day which makes him feel guilty but he uses it to stick closer to Percy and help in any way he can.

No one talks about what happened. They don’t report that bastard Luther. All things said, this was a normal day in Arkansas; a typical Wednesday for Black folk in America.

Willie understands this. He knows all too well how some people treat others in this country. He wishes he could do something about it, but what?

These thoughts keep Willie up that night until he falls into a fitful sleep filled with visons of black bodies strung from old oak trees. Some are mutilated, charred. Some struggle in the hot southern breeze. One of them is very familiar and Willie tries to turn away, tries to wake himself but he can’t on his own.

“Kiddo. Willie!” Jack’s urgent whisper breaks through and Willie gasps awake. He’s drenched in sweat and shaking so hard he’s bitten into his lips and he can taste blood.

“You were struggling in your sleep. Must’ve been some nightmare.” Jack opens, waiting to see if Willie wants to talk. But the younger man doesn’t want to at all. He just wants to forget about what he saw so he thanks Jack for waking him and that’s that. He uses his shirt to wipe the sweat from his body and tosses it beneath his bed. He lays back down, still wet, still distressed, but he tries to think about something else.

He thinks about swimming in the Budge’s pond after picking their strawberries when it was harvest time. He thinks about how Tobias used to splash him playfully and how Willie didn’t like it but he let him do it all the same. He’d put up with plenty from Tobias just to spend a little more time with him.

Tobias was one of the few friends he'd had. One of the only people who didn't treat him poorly because of how 'sensitive' he was, how different he was from other boys. He could always count on Tobias at least to smile at him when no one else would even look at him.

Willie couldn't talk about his nightmares without talking about Tobias and he couldn't talk about Tobias without people knowing just how much he meant to him.

Tobias had been his first love, the reason Willie knew he was different from other boys and as much as he trusted Jack and as close as they've grown, Willie just knew he couldn't test that friendship with his biggest secret.

The week ended uneventfully after that. Willie managed to get by with only bad dreams, not the horrific nightmare of before.

While he'd enjoyed his time with Jack and the others, the weeks end brought a renewed vigor to find his old man. Willie says goodbye to the men he worked with and thanked Mr. Rogers for the opportunity once again.

Big George comes over and ruffles Willie's curls and calls him kiddo saying he'd been wanting to do that for a while. Willie frowns at the treatment making him looking even younger and the gathered men break into laughter.

Percy walks up then too with a smile, gently claps Willie on the back wishing him a good journey before placing his own newsboy cap on the younger boy's head.

"Best cover up that halo. You's a travelling man now. Can't let them see how soft you is." Willie thanks Percy for the gift and tells him he won't.

Jack has another week in Little Rock, they're building a hospital next, so all he can do is walk Willie to the tracks and go over once again the plans they'd made for getting him to Washington. Willie recites back to him where he's supposed to ride to, at what city he should start moving west.

"You missed the most important part: You need to always be vigilant of when the train approaches the station and avoid those bulls."

"Trust me Jack, I learned my lesson the last time. You don't have to worry for me. I'll make it ok."

"I know you will." Jack claps a gentle hand on Willie's shoulder. They arrive near the train tracks in a wooded area early in the morning. He looks like he's struggling with something more to say and finally spits it out.

"When we were talking before, 'bout that fellow that helped you out and I asked if he was German, you remember that?"

Willie takes a moment to recall and nods. "Yeah, I never heard German before."

“Right, well… you talking about not recognizing the accent made me remember this run in I had a few months back. I was working in Texas and a few bums were talking about some bodies being found in the woods, beaten beyond recognition, tortured they said. Now, killing isn’t uncommon when you’re outside of society like we are but folks were real scared with how brutal this guy was. People tried sticking close together, forming small groups and such.

“Anyway, I was out taking a leak one night and on my way back I saw one of the bodies. I won’t tell you the details but I swear it must have snatched a piece of my soul to see a human being in such a way. I high tailed it out of there needless to say, but before I made it back to my camp and my companions I saw someone in the dark. Willie it was almost as bad as looking at that corpse, the terror I felt when I saw him. He couldn’t have been older than me. I think he was a white man but I didn’t stop to get a better look. I mostly saw his eyes and they were… sometimes thinking about them eyes I get nightmares myself. And then he called to me. By god that demon said, *“A lovely night for a walk, isn’t it?”* in an accent I couldn’t identify, something sort of Germanic but I couldn’t be sure.

“What I’m trying to say is, and I know I’ve already said this plenty over the week, but please be careful of everyone you meet. I know my experience was in Texas but you see how often I meet up with other rail folk, Percy and Old George? I’ve seen them across several states. That killer could still be out there, could be right here with us.”

Willie is scared stiff by Jack’s story. He wishes he hadn’t saved this particular story for right now.

“I’m sorry to spring this on ya kiddo. I wasn’t sure I should bring it up but, I don’t want to hear through the grapevine that… well, just stay safe.” Jack sniffs and looks away, trying to reign in his worry.

“It, it’s ok Jack. I get it. I’ll be careful I promise.”

They hear the train as it’s being fed, as it slowly starts moving, the metal creaking slowly over the track. The other tramps start emerging from all directions, sprinting to get onboard.

“There’s your cue Willie. I hope I'll see you around some time.” Willie hesitates for a moment before quickly grabbing Jack around the midsection for a quick and awkward hug that takes the older boy by surprise before he grins and pats the youngin’ on the back and telling him he best take off.

Jack watches Willie and Winston run over and jump onto the train, a seasoned pro now after strenuous work and practice. Willie stands up and starts waving happily back at him and Jack returns the gesture, smiling fondly at the young man perhaps for the last time.

Then, over Willie’s shoulder from the darkened boxcar, a face that Jack hoped never to see again emerges. The face of the only monster Jack believes in.

He shakes off the shock and starts running, yelling at the top of his impressive lungs for Willie to jump off! *“He’s in there!”* But it’s too late. The train has sped up beyond his ability to follow and dread settles over him like never before. Jack is a tough man. He stopped

crying long ago but tears gather at his eyes now. Willie is in the belly of the beast. Kind, innocent Willie whom he grew to care for, he truly may never see him again.

Chapter End Notes

Mr. Rogers isn't named after the same one you might be thinking of. That's my grandpa.

Knowledge of building construction is from the time i took a construction course in high school so it might not be accurate for the time period.

knee shaker: a sit down meal with the family

jungle: hobo camps

Chapter 4

See Willie.

See Willie run.

Run, Willie, run!

paraphrase of:

Fun with Dick and Jane

Hannibal had long accepted that in his future there would be solitude.

After his family had been taken away, it was only him against the world. Even when his uncle Robert had him sent from Lithuania to the states, he knew he was truly alone.

Uncle Robert couldn't understand him at all. He tried his best given the tragic circumstances his nephew endured but he couldn't see the pain that destroyed the boy he once was, leaving a monster behind instead. No one could.

No one could see so Hannibal began watching instead. Was it really so difficult to see the truth of a person? Wasn't his own truth written plain as day on his soul? Did it not shine through and beg for attention?

He watches people as they go about their lives though he no longer sees them as people. At least not on par with himself. He finds the lot of them boorish and boring. They are nothing but swine waiting to be culled, in need of being slaughtered in order to keep the world from being inundated, devoured by their stench and disease.

He's thought like this for some time now. He even had these very thoughts the first time he saw Willie. But that's not entirely true is it? Hannibal fancies himself staunch in the belief systems he's refined over time but upon first laying eyes on Willie, some new belief was being cultivated. A belief not rooted in any religion but something deep in the marrow of his bones. An ache that settled in his chest that he'd never experienced before.

Hannibal has always known about his tastes, his desires. During his travels he'd seen the ways in which men satisfied their lust at the expense of youths like him. He'd successfully avoided and at times punished them for their overly amorous attentions, disgusted by the very idea he'd ever share a piece of himself with them.

He'd travelled to New York firstly after running away from his uncle, from a place he couldn't fathom calling home. It may not be the capital of the country but it is certainly the hub where cultures collide, where people can experience the new, the strange, the thrilling.

He'd always known he preferred boys to girls and being in New York City where there are so many different types of people he'd found small pockets of the so called 'deviants' of his ilk.

In private clubs in Manhattan where the well to do rub elbows, one might find rich men and lovely youths all trying to decide if they suited one another for a tryst.

Hannibal could appreciate attraction but no one had ever moved him to action. Not until Willie's eyes had sought his in that darkened freight car.

He remembers wanting to get closer even as he instinctively moved himself further away. He, who fears no man, retreated from a boy a few years his junior because… because of what? It couldn't be something so base as lust. Then what, love?

Can any high functioning being that dares call themselves intellectual truly believe in something so trite and fanciful as love at first sight? Is that all it took? A mere glance of sparkling eyes in the too quick moonlight as it passed over the boy's face?

It was impossible according to Hannibal's beliefs. Yet, even so, he couldn't quite get the boy off his mind.

At their first meeting he'd left the train before the boy awoke but instead of jumping off he climbed along the outside of the boxcar and sat on top, waiting to discover who the boy was and why he called to him so.

As he followed the other boy he began to worry that he was merely attracted to the pretty youthfulness of him. It sickened him to the pit of his stomach that he was no better than the pederasts he'd witnessed in opulent Manhattan.

For the first time Hannibal found himself stalking someone, not as potential prey, not to slate his bloodlust, but to find a sense of redemption, proof that he wasn't one of the pigs he so loathed.

He watched as the boy made his way through town, as he was accosted by the Bulls and rescued by Jack.

Yes, he'd stood by several dozen yards away and watched the beautiful youth be hassled. Hannibal's short nails had bitten into his palms as he forced himself to stand idly by in a weak attempt to discover his true feelings for the other boy.

What a stupid experiment he'd attempted. A nonsensical way to force himself to look at the boy in a different light. Whatever the original intent had been, it'd failed of course. He felt disgusted with himself after that. Why was he willing to see Willie destroyed for his own sick machinations?

The answer of course was fear. He hadn't felt the sickening emotion in so long that he hadn't recognized it at first. Least of all not where infatuation was involved. He liked the boy, simple as that. What was wrong with it? He'd long ago abandoned society's ideals for how one must conduct themselves, he had no shame to know he was attracted to men. So what frightened him? The prospect of finally being seen by one who finally managed to move him?

After that day he vowed to not be so cowardly where Willie was concerned. He took the jealousy he felt at the sight of Willie and Jack growing closer as a just punishment for his earlier betrayal.

He silently promised to learn more about the boy and if nothing else, be seen by him just once. One singular moment to look upon the boy and have him look back. No shadow to protect him, just to be seen by him and to see how he is received.

He followed them to Little Rock where he kept a small camp just outside of the workers lodgings. There, he could watch Willie from afar. Sometimes he'd go as far as mixing in with a crowd just to be near him. In those times he learned his name and caught too quick whiffs of the boy's stilted and unsure speech.

He'd gotten close enough to discover that Willie planned to find his father. He heard Jack's advice on which train to take and scoffed at his suggestions. Hannibal had originally planned to make his way back to his uncle's home in Baltimore, but upon knowing the boy's path was subpar, well, shouldn't he help Willie on his way as any good Samaritan might do?

It was serendipitous, the boxcar he'd chosen this day. He'd initially imagined simply riding on the same train and then 'happening' upon Willie at the next stop but as the engine began churning, moving down the track he watched Willie and his four legged friend climb aboard his own car, this time with confidence and a strength he'd lacked previously. Hannibal smiled at his great turn in luck.

He drew closer to the boy, instinctively. He watched the silly young thing happily bidding farewell to his erstwhile companion and he took delight in the look of pure horror that fell over Jack's face as their eyes met.

Hannibal raised a hand to offer his own goodbye before gently resting it on the boy's shoulder, effectively startling the shorter boy with the sudden contact. Over the building cacophony of sounds from the track and engine, he can just make out Jack's desperate pleas for Willie to jump off. The boy seems not to notice, so surprised is he by the man's materialization out of thin air.

Hannibal is of course pleased to have the his undivided attention.

Though Hannibal had first been delighted by the conclusions Jack was no doubt drawing in his head, ultimately it didn't sit well with him. That anyone could think he'd harm such a pure spirit as this boy. And indeed he is pure.

He himself saw how respectful Willie was not only to his elders but anyone deserving. He watched when he shared the fresh rolls he'd just purchased after his first payday with the

local children covered in dirt and bug bites. He saw how Willie blushed when Jack spoke of his fiancé to be and asked if he had a girl back home. He wondered if that blush was because he did and Hannibal hoped against hope he did not.

So he finally had the boy back in his midst. The startled boy who had no idea whom he was looking up at. Hannibal quickly remedied that.

“How fortuitous that we should meet again.” The man says to a pair of lovely doe eyes that only grow wider at the recollection of the man’s voice.

“Oh, it’s you!” Excitement takes over the former worry along with the boy’s unapologetically thorough perusal of the mystery man’s face.

So curious, he, the man thinks fondly to himself. Of course, he can’t blame the lad for he too has been guilty of such. He does so enjoy gazing at Willie.

He remembers the first time he saw him under the sunlight, saw the shades of golden brown mixed into his lovely mahogany curls.

And his eyes. Oh, how he thought they’d sparkled in the moonlight. But once the sun had its way, blues and grays had shone through and pierced his heart during those glances he’d stolen while walking beside an unaware Willie in a crowded street.

Now Hannibal bows slightly at the waist, a rather pretentious gesture in any other vagrants eyes but to the criminally pure boy in front of him, it only adds to the alluring air of mystery and intrigue.

The man motions to a dark corner for them to sit down. It’s rather nefarious. Hannibal can hear utterances of Mary Howitt, *“Will you walk into my parlour?' said the Spider to the Fly."*

And Willie follows easily, in spite of the warnings Jack has drilled into him over their time together. *What a silly trusting little creature,* Hannibal thinks. *Lucky for him, he has me.*

Hannibal sits first. He moves his knapsack, indicating where he wants Willie to sit and the boy, ever obedient, does just that. Willie sets down his own bag and leans against it then he tries to persuade his animal to sit at his side. But the creature is still reluctant, rather smart for such a low beast so Hannibal gives him some credit.

“I wasn’t sure I’d see ya ‘gain.” Willie mutters after getting settled. The boys hand goes straight to the animals fur; a comfort that Hannibal is certain is more for Willie than the dog.

“One can never be certain what they might find rolling on these great steel beasts.”

The spark of curiosity in Willie’s eyes is reignited the more Hannibal speaks and the man wonders what is going through that curly head of his.

“Steel beasts? You sure sound fancy mister.” Willie shakes his head. “And differ’nt… than last time I mean.”

The man smiles at that, somewhat surprised at himself for enjoying the boy's mangled English.

"I suppose I do sound rather 'fancy' given the region but I can assure you I am quite ordinary where I hail from. I'm more concerned with you continuing to call me mister after seeing my face. Do I truly look so much older than you?" The man teases gently, deciding to match the youths curiosity with his own.

"I s'pose not," Willie bites his lip in consternation. "But you sure sound older. Didn't wanna be too familiar just in case."

"How endearingly respectful. Quite rare given our current lifestyles but all together very much appreciated."

The older boy watches his junior's eyes go a bit wide again. Willie takes out a tattered piece of folded paper and the snub of a pencil to jot something down before shoving it away just as quick. *Curiouser and curiouser…*

He decides to save this bit of intrigue for later, wanting to formally and finally make long overdue introductions.

"With all the excitement of our first meeting we were unable to properly make each other's acquaintance," He offers a hand for the boy to take. "Hannibal, Hannibal Lecter."

"Willie umm… Willie Graham," The boy mirrors his introduction and is rewarded with the lengthening of the casual smirk Hannibal usually wears. A twitch of the lips hiding the fact he already knew the boy's name and quite a bit more.

"Willie is it? Short for William and so given by your family?" The boy nods. It's infantile yet still somehow endearing. Hannibal can't help but smile and utter, "It's rather sweet."

Willie gets ruffled at Hannibal's words much to the older boy's delight. "Ain't sweet, *mister*." The youth finished under his breath.

I'd beg to differ, Hannibal thought. "Again with this mister. How old do you believe me to be? How old are you?"

"15 since August." Willie crosses his arms over his chest, proud as any youth might be.

"Ah," Hannibal says, an impressed if not amused expression passes over his face before . "I myself will be 19 this January."

Twinkling, astonished blue eyes lock onto Hannibal's face for another look. The older boy turned better to face his compatriot, a handsome upturn of Hannibal's lips as he tries not to preen, too much at least.

Hannibal watches as the younger boy traces with his lovely eyes the curve of his lips and the crinkle of his eyes and wonders, *what does he see? I know I am not much older than he but I feel like a pensioner compared to the doe eyed boy before me.*

He awaits the younger boys assessment, breath nearly bated, but all Willie offers him is a quiet ‘oh’.

Hannibal isn’t satisfied with that at all. He wants badly to press the boy for his opinion but as well he is loath to appear so needy, so soon.

“Oh,” is all he says in response, turning back to face the open freight door and the rapidly passing scenery.

Some time passes in silence after that. Not entirely awkward nor uncomfortable but certainly anxious. It’s an odd feeling for Hannibal who rarely places himself in others’ close proximity not to mention finding himself concerned with what another person thinks of him.

Willie must have felt the slight tension as well because he opens and closes his mouth several times, attempting to speak.

Hannibal can hear the sticky clicking of the boys dry mouth, the sound grating on his sensitive ear. Strangely he didn’t find himself offended by the nuisance, rather he simply reaches into the bag at his side and removes a glass mason jar filled with clear liquid. He unscrews the lid before taking a sip and passes it over.

“Must keep hydrated.”

“Hydrated,” Willie whispers as if he were trying out the feel of the word in his mouth. He takes the jar and is very careful not to spill in his excitement as refreshing water passes over his dry tongue. Willie sighs in satisfaction and passes the jar back but Hannibal tells him to drink another mouthful.

“We must conserve our stores but I believe you haven’t brought many provisions along with you.”

Willie takes another drink, rather small, not as greedy as any other in his position. “I got some cans of fruit preserves, tomato soup, and beans. Jack gave me some crackers too.”

“That’s a fine start but you’ll do better with some meat.” Hannibal says as he takes the jar back from Willie, placing it in his bag and removing a handkerchief with a pungent smell emanating from it.

“Jack said I should try not to miss meat too much, told me to get used to beans.”

“He wasn’t wrong but luckily, you’ve made my acquaintance.” Hannibal says smugly as he unwraps the bundle, revealing strips of dry jerky.

Willie’s mouth drops open and saliva begins to pool. Hannibal smiles and indicates for Willie to take a piece. He knows the slop that was fed to Willie over the course of his work was lacking in many ways. The pork in the beans was mostly fat, the vegetables if given were near rotten, the bread full of mealworms.

If Hannibal had anything to say about it, the younger boy would be eating much better from now on.

Hannibal selected a strip of meat himself before stowing the rest. With his peripheral vision he enjoys watching his young friend devour the meat with gusto.

“Thanks a lot m- Hannibal.” Willie whispered after licking the remnants of his snack from his fingers. Hannibal caught the near slip and bit into his lip to keep from smiling like a fool when the boy corrected himself.

“You are very welcome William.”

Silence threatens to descend again but the atmosphere is more comfortable after their shared refreshment. Before Hannibal can broach the next subject, Willie speaks.

“You don’t look 18 ya know?”

Hannibal is pleasantly surprised at being directed back to their previous conversation. “Don’t I? How old do I look then?” He asks eagerly.

“I mean, your face is smooth like mines but the way ya… how ya move… I ain’t got the correct words.” Willie gives up with a small huff of frustration at his poor verbiage; Hannibal’s fond smile is in danger of becoming permenant the more time spent with this boy.

“I’m very certain you do have the correct words William. You can say anything you like, I’m confident I’ll understand your meaning.” Hannibal turns to face the boy, asking with his eyes, *What do you see when you look at me Willie?*

“Well, ya don’t move like kids my age. You got this way ‘bout ya. It’s hard to explain.”

“Do you find me more *mature* than those of our age?” Hannibal helpfully asked.

“*Mature*,” Willie mimicked with a grin, emphasizing the long ‘too’ sound Hannibal had used. “And ya sure don’t talk like others I know. It ain’t really about your age then… maybe it’s your- the way you talk. You ain’t from ‘round here.”

“No I am not. How does that make you feel, knowing I behave so different than you are used to, that I’m from places unknown to you?” Hannibal enjoys delving into people’s thoughts, discovering their truths, but never has he been more interested in a person’s mind as he is in Willie’s.

“I feel like- well, I like how ya talk. Like you’re straight from a book or somethin’; proper like. And bein’ from places I ain’t known before…” Willie worried the sleeve of his flannel as he spoke; Hannibal wanted instantly to soothe the boy’s nerves with his own hands but found them to be just as unsure as Willie’s. “I’m real curious ‘bout ya- ‘bout where ya come from, I mean.”

Hannibal subtly bit into his lower lip to keep the full extent of his delight from his face as he watches the boy fidget. He wonders, hopes, that if he had Willie under proper light, that he find a comely blush. *I’m curious as well,* Hannibal doesn’t say, not nearly as brave in this moment as Willie is.

Even in his eagerness he finds himself habitually leaving some questions unanswered. Namely, those to do with his heritage. It's easy to deflect when he has such a great opening to a simpler topic.

"Do you truly enjoy reading, William? Indeed I've read many books myself."

Willie gives a slight nod before thinking better of it. "I try to read but it's been a good while since the school shut down. 'fore that, there weren't many books to read 'cept those for little kids and I was too bashful to read those in front of people."

"Bashful, what a wonderfully apt term. In spite of setbacks from outside forces you've done rather well for yourself in my opinion." Hannibal's fingers flex before he clenches them into a fist. He mustn't touch the younger boy overly much until he can be certain they share the same 'temperament'.

"I have a few books with me, William. Would you like to borrow one?"

Willie's eyes grew wide and he nods enthusiastically. Suddenly, his joy dimmed and he looked down in shame. "I can't…. I can't read too good Hannibal."

The small admission make his chest ache to hear but it only doubles Hannibal's determination. "Then I'll just have to help you, won't I?"

They spend the next few hours like this, strangers no more as Hannibal shows Willie his dog-eared copy of 'The Great Gatsby'.

"So, what's a gatsby?" Willie asks after looking over the cover.

"Gatsby is a who actually. He's a man of greats means and possibly loose morals, someone whom the protagonist often looks up to, envies, pities, secretly reviles perhaps."

"Protaga-what?" Willie asks, retrieving his scribbled paper.

"Pro-ta-go-nist," Hannibal sounds out more clearly, watching Willie write it down. "That would be the lead character of the story."

"Oh," Willie says simply.

"What an intelligent function you have here. Are these all words you wish to recall for later?"

"I don't know very many. I write 'em down and hope to find out what they mean later."

"You don't ask the person who spoke them for their definition?"

Willie only shakes his head as he puts his tools away.

"Well I'm very happy that you asked me and I want you to keep on doing so from here on, yes?"

“Ok,” Willie smiles sweetly, ducking his head and gripping tightly the book waiting in his hands.

Hannibal consciously scoots himself closer to Willie while telling him to begin reading whenever he’s ready.

Willie gulps audibly but indeed opens the book to page one, his excitement to have a new book in his eager hands outweighing his apparent trepidation at reading in front of a veritable stranger.

“In-my-young-er-and-more-vul…-vulner…-*vul-ner-able-years-my-fa-ther-gave-me-some-sound-ad-vice…”*

Hannibal’s left arm rests against Willie’s right. In the cool air of the car their proximity is comparable to kindling, bursting with warmth, his own manifestation of light in the darkness.

He starts off reading along over the boy’s shoulder but soon he’s simply watching him; the way his lips form each syllable, the slight furrow of struggle settled between his eyebrows accompanied with that ever determined chin. The stilted and uncertain speech would have aroused utter annoyance within Hannibal but this boy, again, is the exception.

Hannibal leans in just enough to take a quick sniff of Willie’s hair, the action unnoticed by the focused boy. He smells of sweat but clean and Hannibal’s cheeks warm at the memory of watching Willie head to the showers the night before as he hid behind a shack. He’d turned away to give him privacy then; he may be a monster at times, he might have stalked the boy, but he wouldn’t become a peeping tom as well.

After the first paragraph is spoken Willie glances up and catches Hannibal with rapt attention firmly aimed at him. The younger boy smiles happily and turns back to work, this time a mite more confident, his accent adding a wonderful quaintness that Hannibal was very much beginning to enjoy.

“Whenever you feel like criti…-criticiz…-*criticizing any one,” he told me, “Just remember that all the people in this world haven’t had the ad-van-tages that you’ve had.”*

“Whenever you feel like criticizing…” Willie reread the passage once more before looking to Hannibal who took the cue and defined the new word for him.

“That there is very good advice. My pa, he weren’t as good with his words but even bein’ some poor fisherman he knew we had it better than some others.” Willie smiled, recalling his father’s teaching before readying himself to dive back into the story.

“You’re entirely right. I can see how a lesson in empathy passed from a beloved father to a cherished son would have a great impact not only on the child but in the way he interacts with the world around him.” Hannibal has read this story several times but now he realizes how fortunate he is to hear it once more from an entirely different perspective.

Hannibal could very well have known people like Gatsby and Nick Carraway during his time with uncle Robert. He wonders just how apathetic he is compared to this poor fisherman’s

son.

From there on Hannibal helps Willie with some more vocabulary and grammar questions causing him to feel like a tutor; a not entirely unpleasant situation to be found in. The boy takes some coaxing but he finally deems Hannibal worthy enough to take a look at the scraps of paper he keeps hidden, filled with dozens of undefined, misspelled words.

Soon enough the train starts to slow as they reach the station near St. Louis, startling Hannibal from the comfortable haze of simple domesticity he and Willie were playing at. They pack their belongings and tumble from the train.

The early morning sun is steadily rising as the younger boy removes his notes again but this time to peruse his itinerary.

“Where are you headed next, if I may?” Hannibal asks as if he doesn’t already know.

“I’m supposed to go to Kansas next. All the way to California and then up to Washington.” Willie puts his effects away and then whistles for Winston to come back after the dog found a squirrel to chase. “How ‘bout you?”

“I was planning to go out that way as well, but I’ll be taking a different route.” Hannibal says, regret lacing his words.

Willie looks disappointed as well as he nibbles his lower lip in thought. *Come on Willie, tell me what you think of that.*

“Maybe… can we…”

“Yes?” Hannibal prompts.

“Is there a way we can travel together for a ways?” Willie asks shyly.

“That is a perfect idea William. Travel would be so much more bearable if we were together.” Inside Hannibal rejoices at how easy it was, how eager Willie is to join him.

“If I may suggest, I believe you’d get to your destination sooner if you went up through Missouri to Nebraska.”

Willie nods in thought. “I reckon so. I really appreciate Jack helping me with this plan but… well… as long as we get to pa soon I’ll be happy.”

“I promise you will reach your father as quick as possible.” Hannibal assures.

Willie smiles at the older boy’s words but his confidence leaves him and his face falls.

“Jack… he really helped me a lot. He told me I should…” Willie pushes down his growing anxiety and looks at Hannibal with determination. “Why should I trust you, Hannibal? And why are you helping me? We don’t know each other from Adam.”

How fiercely he says my name, Hannibal thinks excitedly while gazing into Willie's eyes. *Fierce yet still so lovely.*

"You're right of course," Hannibal responds in all seriousness. "You have no reason to trust me enough to reroute your schedule. I'd only be able to beg that you take a blind leap of faith in me. And as for why I'm helping you… I'm afraid to even say it aloud."

His last sentence has Willie's eyebrows peaking in interest, intrigued as Hannibal had hoped. "Afraid? Afraid of what?"

Hannibal sighs in feigned unease. "Although we've only just met I… I'm rather afraid to say just how much I've come to enjoy our time together and I would like to continue with our conversations, and our readings. I know you have a very important task and I'd hate to distract you from that just because I wish to spend a little more time together."

Hannibal hopes he didn't overdo his thinly veiled amorous intentions. Of course, the very pure spirit before him only hears that someone wants to spend time with him and he turns slightly red around the ears. Willie drops his head and now the brown cap he wears is covering his expression making Hannibal want to throw the thing to the ground and stomp on it.

"I- I'd really like that, Hannibal." Hannibal doesn't so much mind about the blocked view all of a sudden. He can feel his own flesh grow warm just from hearing the way his name forms in the boy's beautiful mouth. *Haaannibal*. It tickles the ear so.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Thoughts in cursive.

After making tentative plans beside the train, Hannibal suggests they have a meal before embarking on the next leg of their journey. They find the main road and walk until they come across a small town with an outdoor market.

Hannibal doesn't approve of what Willie has been forced to eat over the past week so he's making it his mission to feed the other boy properly.

Before engaging with the small crowd Hannibal sets himself to rights. He removes a handkerchief from his pocket and cleans his face. He then wipes the dust from the younger boy's face as well.

Finally, he shakes their clothes out as best he can and then fixes Willie's hair before replacing his cap. He then retrieves and dons his own dark gray herringbone cap.

"There isn't very much we can do to appear presentable but one must try their best, mustn't they?" Hannibal just catches Willie rolling his eyes at his words. He turns back to gently tap the boy's nose in admonishment. "Appearances are important especially when ours can insight the ire of the more 'respectable' folk."

After giving the definition for the word **ire**, Hannibal waits for Willie to write the new term in his book. He then steps back to look over Willie under the pretense of checking his work. He nods happily at the beautiful boy and leads him and his dog into the thick of it.

"Mayhaps I don't wanna care what they think o' me." Willies whispers fiercely in Hannibal's ear, seemingly angry at even the idea of putting on airs for anybody.

"I agree, William. Neither of us should care what those people think and I'm sorry that you've mistaken my words. We should try our best to blend in with society in order to move about as we please. If they think we are more like them, the more likely they are to leave us be. It's a sad fact, I'm afraid, that some people must abandon their individuality, their autonomy, for the sake of the masses for no better reason than to make them feel more comfortable. People are often afraid of anything different from what they consider normal. They can be afraid to the point of panic and rage. I'm sure you know this all too well, being born in the south after all, what lengths men are willing to go to to prove they aren't afraid. They'll prove it with anger and violence, won't they?"

Willie's anger leaves his body cold at Hannibal's words and the older boy feels the loss of his fire acutely. He much prefers the more intense reactions of rage lurking within the boy but his earlier words still stand. They have to hide what sets them apart from the world simply in order to exist within it.

"You're right. I just hate it. We had such a good morning so far, I just don't want others to ruin it." Willie takes more care after that. Dusts himself off a bit more and then bends down to do the same for Winston.

He misses the fond look Hannibal aims at him, the older boy is very happy with how Willie has enjoyed their time together thus far. If it were his choice, they'd never have to hide themselves from anyone again. They'd live under the brilliant light of day unafraid, always.

He pushes down his fantasies and starts with the egg seller. Hannibal speaks amiably to the locals, making polite conversation, complementing them on their delicious produce; generally setting them at ease.

He can feel Willie's eyes on him the entire time. Hannibal is using that same odd accent from when they first met. Not quite French, not quite Creole but something familiar enough even in rural Missouri not to warrant any questions.

Hannibal tries to include Willie in the conversation but the boy keeps his head down, only whispering his greetings and avoiding eye contact with the strangers. Hannibal only smiles at that and makes his purchases with money he's collected from 'benefactors' along the way.

They leave the market with Hannibal carrying half a dozen eggs in his cap, resting in a pair of wool gloves. Willie holds a small burlap sack with bacon, zucchini, and onion.

They follow signs northwest toward U.S. Route 40 along the way looking for a decent place for a quick camp. Hannibal can sense the questions bubbling up within Willie and decides to save his young friend the trouble of asking.

"After The Great War, there grew a distrust, a downright hatred for Germans or anyone of German descent. I'm not German but my accent, my heritage, is unknown to most so they supplant what they don't know with what they do. Thus my mysterious European accent must be German and I must be hated for it.

"This is when I first learned that I must hide myself. As I was saying earlier, I hate hiding as well but I can't fight every hot blooded ignoramus. I can't spend my days convincing people that I'm not what their limited intellects think of me. Ultimately, I play this game to be blessedly ignored as I go about my business."

Hannibal looks away from Willie as they continue walking. His reasons are simple and make perfect sense but there's a double meaning behind them that he wishes he could vocalize to Willie. He doesn't only need to hide his lineage but he must also hide his heart.

People are even less accepting of a man loving another than they are of foreigners who they liken to boogeymen. He thinks Willie might understand his double meaning. He's caught the

boy looking at him a time or two and hopes it isn't general curiosity but the same curiosity that he has for him.

"I'm sorry, Hannibal." Willie says quietly, ashamed. "I knew you was hiding somethin' but I never thought of that. I understand now what you mean… about hiding."

"Can you?" Hannibal asks simply, gently coaxing his friend to divulge more of himself.

"There's things about me that I wanna hide from folks too."

"Do you hide them from me as well?" Hannibal can't help but ask.

Willie's nerves show themselves at that. So far, the younger boy has had the same composure in his presence as he'd had with Jack. But Hannibal knew even then that Willie worked just as hard as he to blend in, to be normal.

"That's alright, William. If you don't trust me yet, that's fine. Just know that we are more alike than you may think and I'll never turn away from who you truly are."

Willie stares at him, surprised, suspicious, angry. "How can you be sure? Maybe you'll hate me the more you know me."

Hannibal stops them in their tracks. He rests a firm yet gently hand on Willie's shoulder and says fiercely. "I may not know you overly much but I do know I could never hate you for who you truly are."

The intensity of his conviction makes the cool fall day turn warm. Willie stares up at him, emotion welling at the corners of his eyes but he turns away from it, afraid. Hannibal finds the proper word for what he feels in moments like these; moments when Willie reveals a little more of himself. He feels hope.

He's not had much hope in recent years. It wasn't hope that drove him to traverse the country with vengeance on his mind. But it is hope now that twinges in his chest and whispers in his ear to *give the boy more time to sort out his feelings, he'll be yours soon enough*.

Hannibal allows this hope to grow and have agency over his actions. He must, in order to tamp down the impatience that's been steadily growing as well. Willie is like him, he just knows it. *Willie shall be mine!* So for the first time Hannibal indulges in hope, takes a deep breath, and squeezes Willies' shoulder affectionately in lieu of dragging him into a hug the way his body is screaming for at the moment.

They continue walking once they are able to put away their swirling emotions until Hannibal finds a suitable place for breakfast before they cross the bridge over the Missouri River.

Willie gathers some sticks for kindling and tinder at Hannibal's behest while the older boy readies his supplies. After Willie easily starts and maintains the fire, he looks up and is surprised to find that Hannibal has a simple white bowl with a blue rim with their eggs already scrambled within. Willie gets a closer look and sees that Hannibal had quite a bit

stowed in his pack; a bowl, a plate, a spoon, a large knife and even a dutch oven is pulled from his bag.

He then gathers several rocks, one rather large and flat, the other four about the size of baseballs.

Willie asks if he needs help so Hannibal tells him to keep the fire hot and add more tinder to create more ash. In that time Hannibal has gone to the river to wash the flat rock and rinse the vegetables and other tools. Willie takes a seat beside the fire; he and Winston watch Hannibal cut the vegetables on the flat rock.

Hannibal then arranges the four rocks from earlier in the still smoldering ash and then sets the dutch oven on top of them. He lays four thick strips of bacon in the hot pan. The scent of sizzling bacon soon has both boys sighing in pleasure causing them to laugh and effectively dismantling the earlier tension kicked up by their emotions.

Once the bacon cooks down, the flesh crisps and the iron skillet is filled with its rendered fat, Hannibal removes the bacon to the metal plate and then takes a jar from his sack and pours some of the bacon fat into it.

Hannibal catches a soft noise from Willie and he looks up to see an adorable expression of surprise on the younger man's face. He pauses for a time just to gaze back at Willie until he comes to his senses and apologizes for staring.

"It's just, you got damn near a full kitchen in your bag. I can't believe you carry all o' this."

"It's a necessity if one enjoys good food as much as I do, believe me. I can't imagine resigning myself to tinned food for the duration of my travels."

Hannibal uses a long stick to push some glowing kindling under the pot to embolden the heat. He then adds the chopped vegetables and once those are cooked to his liking, he adds the beaten eggs.

Winston has been very well behaved throughout this time so Hannibal gladly gives him two of the cooled off strips of bacon, earning him a beautiful smile from Willie; his motivation for being kind to the animal in the first place.

Willie's mouth is watering like a faucet by the time Hannibal spoons the simple hash onto the plate. He hands it to Willie to begin eating while casually mentioning they should find another set of eating utensils for the younger boy soon. He gathers the dutch oven, knife, and bowl and washes them by the river, leaving them to dry and then rejoining Willie who passes the plate back to share.

Hannibal eats several mouth fulls and half of a bacon strip and then insists that Willie finish the rest while he goes over their new itinerary.

In Willie's original plan, the boy would have simply waited for another north bound train to roll down the same track they'd just left. Hannibal, however, is taking them across the entire state of Missouri to Kansas City where they'll utilize another track to continue their journey.

He realized the need for this when he saw how hard Jack had run, how he tried to warn Willie off the train. He'll take a completely different route than Jack had planned for the boy and then he'll just have to wait and see if Jack's concern is great enough to warrant him going all the way to Washington to find them.

After eating, Willie washes the plate and spoon himself. He dries them with his flannel and puts them and the other cooking items into his own knapsack after knowing Hannibal carries so much by himself. Hannibal smiles at the boy's thoughtfulness but arrests the heavy iron skillet from him, replacing it in his own bag after thanking Willie.

They walk up the highway, with full bellies, hoping for a car to pass so they can bum a ride. Willie finds a stick to play fetch with Winston and Hannibal enjoys watching the happiness change Willie's often worried face.

Spending but one simple morning with William Graham has left an impression on Hannibal, to put it simply. He hasn't experienced such a flux of emotions to his recollection. He can't imagine sharing so much of himself with another person let alone welcoming the changing feelings within him; only with Willie can he feel so free.

Hannibal is more and more satisfied that he isn't merely enamored with the younger boy's visage but that something indeed calls to him from within Willie… it's both thrilling and terrifying but wholly desirable.

They cross the bridge and continue on down Route 40. They are both growing ever more comfortable in the others presence, evidenced by Willie filling up the quiet midmorning with the story of how he met Winston. How he's named for Winston Churchill, not the British Admiral who would later be known for emboldening troupes during World War II, but rather for the American writer whom Willie had discovered on the desk of his third grade teacher.

The younger boy talks a mile a minute about where he came from, what he's seen, Jack's kindness and just how he and his father were separated. It's then that Hannibal realizes the boy's speech patterns are changing. Rather, Willie has been evolving not only his vocabulary but adapting during his time with Jack and now Hannibal as well. The older boy is impressed and encourages his friend to keep talking, flitting from one topic to another as if he were a hummingbird sampling nectar.

When Willie speaks of home Hannibal can't help but think of his own or at least where home should be. Though his travels have been bloody fruitful and enlightening, he can't deny how much he has missed the comforts of a privileged life.

His uncle was very well to do back in Lithuania. The Lecter name was once synonymous with wealth and elegance. Uncle Robert had moved to America to enjoy the life of a foreign dignitary, using connections and assets to grow his wealth exponentially.

When Hannibal first arrived in America his uncle taken much joy in showing him all that growth entailed. Several properties spread across the eastern seaboard. The newest model of automobile. Fashions from around the world.

Uncle Robert lived a full, rich life but all the money in the world can't by you more time when your number is up. He passed away last December leaving Hannibal everything in spite of the boy never having grown close to him. Hannibal waited a couple months to solidify his plans and he left Baltimore to exact his revenge.

It's not that he wasn't grateful to his uncle for taking care of him, for bequeathing his fortune to him, but he had more pressing things on his mind than golf at the country club or cigars with yet another magnate.

Now that his mission is complete he will, indeed, go back to what he knows as home. He'll endure the questions from his uncles attorneys concerning his whereabouts in order to properly fulfil his inheritance. He'll try to be emotional as he describes his harrowing experiences on the road, driven there by the enduring grief of losing his entire family, and so on and so forth.

He's thought of this plan since the last swine was slaughtered. Wondering if they would expect tears from him. Would his true wickedness be revealed when he can't manage a single drop even to save his story?

It matters not to Hannibal when it's all said and done. He'll cross that bridge when he reaches it.. What does matter is what it will take to convince Willie to accompany him back as well?

Yes, in just one short day he knows with certainty that he wants to keep this boy. Never has he felt such companionship outside of his long dead family and by the powers that be, he will keep this new chance at family close and keep it safe.

Though Hannibal is manic in his desires, selfish in his needs, he understands that he can't simply take Willie and bind him to himself. He sees the determination in this boy and though different, it mirrors his own in a way.

So, he'll accompany Willie wherever he must and watch over him, keep him hale and safe. He'll do these things as a selfless friend might but, in the end, he will take his boy home with him.

And it will finally be a home won't it? He never thought of any of Robert's properties as such before but now… now he can imagine Willie's wide eyes looking at 'Lecter Manor', a place Hannibal once considered an eyesore, he can just see it through Willie's eyes and it has become far grander, far more inviting. He'll convince his friend to stay with him, he'll give him whatever it is he desires to keep him.

"Your home sounds lovely, William." Hannibal supplies when Willie takes a breath.

"Well it ain't like that no more." The younger boy says sadly.

"You might find a new home somewhere else. That would be just as fine, wouldn't it?" Hannibal hopes.

"I s'pose, if my pa is there. And maybe…" Willie trails off after that and refuses to expound on his discarded thought.

Hannibal keeps that tentative hope. He imagines Willie was going to say *and maybe you could come too Han.*

He indulges himself in recollection of the excitement twinkling in his friends' pure eyes when they'd decided to travel together and how satisfying the boy's eagerness had been. Certainly this is a good start where his new plans are concerned.

Hannibal smiles as he thinks this over during their trek, kicking stones and watching the wolfdog chase jackrabbits. He's surprised yet again at how easy it is to be here and how he could have missed out on it had he not decided to engage with Willie.

He recalls the mistake he made. He'd been there when the two bulls were harassing Willie and done nothing. He'd wanted to see what the boy would do but after watching Jack save him, he knew he'd ruined a perfectly good chance to get closer. He pushes down the anger and disappointment in himself; he'll never sit idly by where Willie is concerned again.

Finally, after walking for a little over two hours, a beat-up truck rolls to a stop a few yards in front of them. The driver is a typical looking white male from middle America in his 40s. He leans out his window and the sun catches on his glasses nearly blinding the boys. "Hey there fellas! Need a lift?"

"Yessir!" Willie says excitedly before Hannibal can open his mouth. The stranger turns his head and the sun's glare disappears to reveal his gleaming eyes which stare at Willie. Hannibal purses his lips and takes a deep breath to quell the rising tide of rage.

"That dog'll have to go in the back and how about the little feller sits in the cab with me where it's warm?" The man pats the seat beside him and lovely, innocent Willie sensing no danger, moves to comply.

"Just a thought, William," Hannibal says softly with a hand on the boy's shoulder. "Perhaps it would be best if you were in the truck bed with Winston. He still isn't very familiar with me after all."

The boy agrees wholeheartedly and jumps in the back without a care in the world. He whistles for Winston to follow before happily seating himself with his back against the partition. Hannibal removes his overcoat and drapes it over Willie all while the man sputters, trying to come up with an excuse for the boy to sit with him instead.

Hannibal takes the seat, closes the door and smiles back at Willie through the back window once more. He lets out a breath to relax himself before turning towards the man and giving him one of the most calculating smiles he's ever used. Shy, timid, a dash of coquettishness. Things one would never associate with the older boy but he's been watching William so closely these past days that he does a fine imitation of innocence.

So fine in fact that the man, Mr. Stammets as he introduces himself, gives that same subtly lecherous smile he'd given Willie. With the driver so placated, they take off.

They drive for nearly an hour, Hannibal looks back for the sixth time to check on Willie, smiling to see him cuddled with his animal and wrapped in Hannibal's clothing, dozing. The

man provides small talk, mostly about the weather and then some useful news about the dustbowl threatening dozens of counties just south of them.

“So, are you boys kin?” Stammets’ smile is congenial as he makes inquiries.

“Do you find we share a certain resemblance?” Hannibal asls simply, lips curved slightly but provocative enough for the man to do a double take. Hannibal turns his attention to the passenger window as he begins undoing his sleeve buttons.

Stammets chuckles. “Well, I suppose not but your youth. Just thought family traveling together made more sense.”

“More sense than what, Mr. Stammets?”

“I don’t know. More sense than two young boys subject to the dangers of the road.”

Hannibal hums. “Yes, it can be quite dangerous. Travelling together can diminish some of the risk. And we aren’t all that young Mr. Stammets.” Hannibal licks his lips slowly, making certain the man sees. The man grips the steering wheel tighter.

“No you are not.” He agrees. “But you can’t be older than 16 and your friend, he’s what? About 13.” The man adjusts his rear-view mirror in a way he thinks is sly but Hannibal knows he’s aimed it at him and can practically feel the hunger radiating off of him.

“About.” Hannibal nods as he undoes the rest of his buttons, revealing a white undershirt beneath.

Stammets watches this and gulps, asking just where the boys are headed.

“We’re on our way to grandmothers house,” Hannibal answers. “My William has met one wolf already but I can’t help wonder if they are any more creatures in the woods waiting to gobble us up.”

Hannibal removes his button up, folds it and tucks it beneath his seat in order to keep it free of blood stains.

The car slows to a stop on the shoulder of the road. “You don’t haveta be afraid, I would never hurt lovely boys such as yourselves.” Stammets slides across the bench seat and rubs his hands up Hannibal’s now bare, smooth arms. The older man is already panting, his warm breath tickles Hannibal’s collarbone, making him want to retch.

“Maybe, Mr. Stammets, I am the one you should fear.” Hannibal simmers, turning with his back to the car door.

The man doesn’t heed this warning. Instead he grabs Hannibal by his thin waste and dares place his disgusting lips by the boy’s ear, signing his own death warrant. “When your friend wakes up I want him too. I’ll pay of course.”

“Yes, Mr. Stammets,” Hannibal mutters as the man goes to undo his belt. He’s completely oblivious to the large knife the young man is sliding from beneath the seat. “You’ll pay

dearly."

When Willie wakes up, he looks behind him to check on Hannibal but finds only one person in the cab; the driver. He bangs on the window, scared until he gets a look at the person's face.

"Hannibal? What are you doing?" Willie yells through the glass. Hannibal pulls the car over. Willie and Winston quickly climb from the bed and get in the front. "Where'd he go?

"He pulled over to relieve himself. I drove off while he was watering a cluster of honey mushrooms" Hannibal suppresses the devilish smile perched on his lips as he starts driving again. He knew he'd have to come up with some story when Willie awoke. He wasn't near ready to allow the boy to see just how right Jack was to fear him. Even still, he is immensely proud of himself at the moment and unable to fully tamp it down.

"You stole his truck?" Willie asks as he looks around himself like a guilty accomplice. *How precious*.

"The man was a pig, William. I won't repeat the things he said to me after you fell asleep, but just know we are very deserving of this boon." Hannibal says with conviction. He looks over to gauge Will's response.

"He... did he do somethin' to ya?" Willie asks, his hands balled into fists, angry on Hannibal's behalf even after the fact.

Affection wells inside Hannibal and he has to fight with his mouth, biting his lower lip to small the huge grin from spreading. He looks back and forth from Willie to the road so he doesn't miss a moment of his beautiful anger.

"He tried. That's all he was allowed to do." Hannibal says after composing himself. "Aren't you upset with me for stealing?" Hannibal tries to sound chastened.

"Hell no, Han! I don't blame ya at all." Willie says, desperate to put Hannibal at ease.

Hannibal frowns for a moment at the nickname Willie just gave him. He should hate it, loath it. Instead, a smile spreads across his face nice and slow just the same as the way Willie spreads the first vowel of his name; *Haaan*.

Hannibal is thankful to the boy for taking his side and easily believing him as well as not noticing the blood splattered under shirt hidden beneath the button up he put back on.

Willie sits quietly for another hundred miles, upset but not willing to use Winston's fur as comfort like he usually does. This makes Hannibal somewhat anxious and he nearly goes to give the dog a scratch behind the ear himself. He take a direct approach after coming to his senses.

"If you aren't angry with my actions, may I know what is the matter?" Hannibal asks.

Willie sighs heavily, happy for the opening from Hannibal. “He seemed alright. How are you s’posed to tell if someone wants to hurt ya. And I fell asleep so easy. What if he did somethin’...”

Hannibal is surprised. “Don’t you dare be angry with yourself William. I’m very happy that you weren’t awake to witness his vileness. As far as discerning who means you ill, that takes time to hone. You have to learn to trust your instincts but you also must trust people to show you who they truly are.”

“What do you mean?” Willie faces him now, hands finally massaging the dog between them.

“You look at them Willie, it all starts there.” Hannibal takes a hand off the wheel to join Willie’s on the dog’s back. He’s too preoccupied in their conversation to realize how beneficial the action is to both man and beast.. “At the market I couldn’t help but notice that you don’t care much for looking into people's eyes, do you?”

“I don’t like the way **they** look at **me**. Like they can tell somethin’ ‘bout me just from one look.” Willie grumbles.

Commiseration burns a path in Hannibal’s chest. *They'll never truly know us, not as well as we can know each other,* Hannibal thinks.

“Yet you meet my eyes quite often.” Hannibal hates the way his voice sounds, so full of hope, so weak but his words summon the boy to look directly at him. Hannibal starts petting Winston with more purpose as he waits for the boy’s response.

“You’re not like other folk, Hannibal.” Willie says as if it were obvious. He then seems to come to his senses, blushes and looks back out the window, abandoning his comforts once again.

“I’m very happy to hear you say that Willie.” It’s Hannibal’s turn to feel his face heat up. His smile is wide and hurts; those muscles haven’t gotten much use for some time.

“So, I gotta start... lookin’?” Willie continues their earlier conversation after some time.

No! Only ever look at me! Hannibal thinks selfishly, then scoffing at his own foolishness.

“Yes. You must be able to identify when people intend to wrong you.” Hannibal says, convincing not only Willie but himself. “If you’d like, I can help you with looking. I can help you see the way I can.”

“Thanks Hannibal. I’d like that.” Willie says quiet though grateful. *So would I Willie. I want you to see me and stay.*

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